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CITY BLOCK

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE UNWELCOME MAN (*Little, Brown*)

THE DARK MOTHER (*Boni & Liveright*)

RAHAS (*Boni & Liveright*)

THE ART OF THE VIEUX COLOMBIER (*Nouvelle Revue
Française*)

OUR AMERICA (*Boni & Liveright*)

VIRGIN SPAIN (in preparation by *Boni & Liveright*)

WALDO FRANK CITY BLOCK



1922
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No. 775

***The author assures the reader that CITY BLOCK
is a single organism and that its parts should be
read in order.***

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THE PERSONS OF THE BOOK

SOPHIE BREDDAN
ANNA SUCHY
MRS LUVE
PAULA DENTY
ESTHER LANICH
LOTTE RABINOWICH
LUCY DARGENT
LEILA DARGENT
JANET LATHRAN
AIMEE LIPFER
JANE McDERMOTT
DORA CARBER
MARY RUDD
ALICE BROADBUS
CLARA JONES
MISS KLAAR
MRS BENATI

FLORA LANICH
HERBERT RABINOWICH
HILDA SUCHY
LOUMA SUCHY
MERWIN LANCASTER
FAITH LANCASTER
ANDY RUDD
JACK RUDD
TILLIE LEWRACH

FATHER LUIS AJALA DENNIS
MEYER LANICH
KARL LOER
CLARENCE LIPFER
MICHAEL SUCHY
VICTOR BREDDAN
RUDD
MR KANDRO
BIPPEN DALEY
JESUS
PETER DAWES
MARTIN LOUNTON
THEOPHILUS LARCH
CESAR DOTT
GODFREY CARBER
JOHN DAWSON
FRED LATHRAN
STEELE
PETER McDERMOTT
PATRICK BROADBUS
ISIDOR RABINOWICH
DOCTOR FINNEY
SILVIS
STUMM
DOOCH
PAOLO BENATI
ROMANO
CICERO
MR BENATI
MR LEWRACH
RAPHAEL SHELAVSKY

THE WHITE MAN
THE BLACK WOMAN
THE CABINET MAKER
THE WAITER
THE PAWNBROKER
THE DOCTORS
CHILDREN

**"By reality and perfection
I understand the same thing."**

Spinoza

ONE
ACCOLADE

CLARENCE LIPPER stepped from the Office into Christmas Eve.

His eyes went out, a gloved hand moved upward, gave a tilt to his brown derby hat. This, his response to what his eyes took in. Then he plunged.

He was not lost.

Below the brim of his hat was a bit of auburn bang and a clear brow. His hat and his features did not go together: perhaps the reason why his hat was so far tilted upward. There was a small fine nose, pushing; a small warm mouth, taking cold air; blue eyes. Against these, in adverse rhythm a hat that tilted, a bamboo cane that swung, shoes spat-ted. Here was *presto*, eyes and nose and mouth were *andantino*. A subtle discord wavering apart in the crude song of the street.

Under its spume of shopping multitude, his body had its pace, his mind its channel. Clarence Lipper was an individual man with shoulders sharp through the churn.

The street was cold and close. Two sides were stores . . . were sieves, sucking, barring. The multitude was agitant, yet constant. It was thick, it gave forth a dull glow like a material half congealed, half ignited . . . balanced between flow and

City Block

solid, between flame and clod. But Clarence went straight. The Sieve had no suck for him. In his pocket were six dollars and some change. In a certain store was a comb-and-brush of Ivory . . the gift for his wife. She had made hints. She was at home this moment, primed to be surprised at the brush-and-comb of celluloid 'tortoise shell' which Clarence was to bring her. It was going to be fun, ran the mood of Clarence Lipper's feet . . as it was rare . . to surprise the subtle Aimée with a surprise she was not primed for.

—Ivory!

A scatter of heads, a hedge of shoulders, a cloud of skirts: he saw a round red face he knew. Very near the pavement. It glowed there. Little eyes toward him made a runway Clarence could not avoid.

"Hello, Biff Daley."

"Just the man I want!" A little fellow snapped his ungloved fingers. His face tilted like a moon.

"Come along . . . Hot toddy."

Clarence stood still: very poised and quiet.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"Sure. I'll say it in the proper place."

Clarence frowned bland. "Merry Christmas Eve's a busy time, old pal, for this here guy. Can't be done."

"O come along. Just one. On me."

"Can't be done. Can't be done. Can't be done."

"Then you won't wish *me* a merry Christmas?"

Clarence was still. "O come on."

City Block

"Can't be done."

They stood, parting the slakish crowd. Clarence threw up his head and let his selfcontrol beam on the low spaces of his friend. Daley was laughing.

"Come along. Coaxin' enough. You ain't crazy all of a sudden? Come along. It's cold. . . Hot toddy."

Clarence's face was high, casting its beam of assurance.

About his face surged the people, blind blank faces all about his face. Beyond his face stood the row of buildings, dim and unreal within their blaring lights: gray and retreating before their serried lights. Above his face a slate sky, solid and far. Before his face, receiving its beam of towering self-control, the moon of Daley.

"Can't be done." . . . The sky cracked open. Like a little red bird came

a brightness

downward.

It grew. Below the sky, over the blind multitude, came Jesus . . . gracefully afloat with one hand forward. He wore a scarlet robe and a gold crown; he wore sandals. He was dressed like the Christ in the Altar of Clarence Lipper's church. He wafted downward as on a gentle sea: one hand in advance like a prow. Very softly with his forefinger he touched the pursed firm lips of Clarence. He disappeared. The crack in the sky was gone.

Clarence Lipper was large. The crowds of the City, shopping, shrank. But he stood pendulous

City Block

before his friend. His arm swung loose. There was a wonderful thirst in his mouth.

Daley locked an arm in the arm of Clarence. They marched off, humming two tunes.

2

The "L" train settled swiftly against the wooden platform: gates jarred open, jarred shut: a progress of sudden bells: the train drew out. Upon the platform a heaped deposit of women and men: they gathered themselves, finding again their separate limits from the shunted mass they had partaken of . . scattering, dying.

Clarence Lipper knocked his heels, then his knees together. He found it hard to gather himself. He stood and swayed, fingering far out over a large expanse in which he felt he lay. Another train. The dispersive sweep of another heaped deposit of men and women caught him, dragged him downstairs.

He turned his body, his legs dangled forward. He looked at the saloon of Michael Connor. It was a blazing point in the dim waste he was living. At once the line of self rose subtly in his mind. He knew that he stood on the corner of the Block where he lived . . —my Block. He had come home. His hands clutched convulsively at his coat-pockets. Empty. He had come home empty. He was almost sober, passing with cold hands over the sharp limits of his self.

City Block

"I am a bad one, I am a bad one," he said. "God! I wish I was drunk. Not even that. O ninny!"

He began to walk. He walked within a circle, upon the corner of the Block where he lived. He had to move. He could move nowhere. He circled. Then he stopped and gazed at the establishment of Michael Connor. It seemed to urge him. He hated it. He bowed to it.

"Let me introduce myself," he said.

He took off his hat, swept it low. "My name is Lipper. . . Clarence Lipper." Silence. He felt degraded, defeated. Upon that level he found that he needed to live. Upon that level he might still find what he needed always: satisfaction.

"A clean job of a dirty job—a low down mean nasty job," he declaimed. A part of him felt sobriety return . . . was panicked. He rushed to the saloon.

Five minutes later, he came out. He was steady. His hat no longer tilted to his brow. He had forgotten his cane. A new mood had him, and almost he seemed ready to enjoy it.

"Low, low, low," he muttered to himself. "Husband of Aimée, this lowness, this shamefulness. Let her behold! Let her see clear! Let her free herself, seeing clear. . . A real Christian present, that. . . My God, yes. That's my gift to the wife. Let her see clear and be free."

He began to walk. "I can stand it. O I can stand it. For her sake. . . I'll take her present.

City Block

Yes, Aimée, though I have no gift in my hand for you, I take your present. I shall never use it. I shall never smoke a cigar with that amber holder! I shall keep it next my heart. In my solitude I shall look at it. Our last exchange of gifts. She gave me this. God bless her! I gave her free eyes to see me by, and freedom to fling me off. . . Fling me off, fling me off! I shall die? I shan't murmur."

He stopped. He found he had been walking with his new steadiness in the wrong direction.

He returned to the corner of his Block.

In the entrance of the Elevated stairs, stood an ancient man.

The eyes of Clarence touched him and were held. They went up and down upon the man. What they saw came in to him, and made him steadier.

The man was upright. He had a coat that was worn hard and shiny: a coat that looked colder than the night. He had a long straight beard of grey. His nose stood sheer to the ploughed cheeks and the beaten eyes, stood under a brow resigned like a field in winter. He was very still, straight . . this Jew. He had delicate fair hands, naked in the night, that held for sale a box of chewing gum.

Clarence stood before him. Clarence and the Jew looked at each other.

"My name is Lipper. I wish you a Merry Christmas."

The vendor bowed his head. He lifted his eyes and saw the young man before them.

City Block

"You—you will haf a Merry Christmas," he said.

Clarence threw up his face and laughed.

"Yes, yes," protested Raphael Sislavsky. He laughed along. "Yes, yes. You see——"

Clarence pulled from his pocket a scattering of coin . . the debris of six dollars.

"A Merry Christmas to you," he poured the money into the case of chewing gum. The old man nodded, with apt hands fended the coin from falling over the edge.

"That's right. That's right," he said. "You see——"

Clarence was suddenly afraid. —He's crazy or something! He stepped away. Over his shoulder, he felt the bearded pedlar nodding and laughing. . .

He walked swift toward home. It was night. The Block was empty. The houses stood high and laden over the empty Block. He walked with hunched shoulders as if each house from its fullness struck him, with eyes turned away . . savagely, idly struck.

He heard his feet fall steady, he walked more lightly in order not to hear them. Then he rebelled at this. He raised his arms over his head and opened his mouth. He gave a shout—gave all of a shout save the sound. He felt better.

"I'm going home," he said aloud, "with a brave Christmas present!"

The houses were hostile, he no longer cared. With hunched shoulders, back bent, head thrust

City Block

forward and down, he marched . . not caring, not seeing.

. . Impact against his body. "O!" He looked up.

A little woman said: "I tried to avoid you: but—Excuse me."

He was very courtly. He felt how he talked like an angel.

"Madame," he said, "it was my fault. I am pre-occupied. I did not look where I was going. Pardon."

He raised his hat and his eyes that were dusk with resignation. He saw a small dim face, tilted back, it seemed full of laughing eyes. She was laughing . . —laughing at me! The pain was sweet to his mood. He needed to return good . . to flourish good . . for this new evil. He said:

"Madame, let me introduce myself. I am Mr Lipper. I wish you a Merry Christmas."

He stepped aside. But she was still before him.

"A right Merry Christmas to *you*. My name is Mrs Luve." She spoke strangely for her hand, lying a moment in his, gave to her words conviction. She withdrew her hand. She pointed upward with her face to the house before which they stood.

"Come, will you? . . just a moment. We'll drink to your Merry Christmas."

He saw her . . drab and battered, a miserable woman. She wore no hat upon her arid hair, a black shawl fended her throat. He knew what she was.

Great warmth was in him. Enthusiasm kindled to his eyes, so that his eyes were hot and overflowing. He saw this broken, miserable woman. He was glad.

"I shall be honored," he said, "to drink with you."

8

He folded his coat carefully, and laid it on a chair. He sat down.

He was sober. The hours had blighted him and left him nothing. He watched his hostess bent before a cupboard. —My hours, he said to himself: her years. He said to himself:—We will drink together to the common Nothing we are and we share.

She saw him, warm and feverish, with his light hair mussed. She gave him his glass. She saw his hand . . his wedding ring . . how he trembled.

She stood.

"Here is the toast," she said: "Your Merry Christmas."

He mustered his strength that seemed to wane at this fine climax of his degradation.

"Must we leave yours out?"

"Let yours come first. It deserves a whole drink." She paused. "You haven't drunk yet."

He drank. Quickly he placed the glass on the table before him. He hid his face in his hands.

City Block

He did not understand.—This is horrible! What horror had mounted upon him from that little point, so remote, so crucial, so unreal: the moment downtown when he yielded to Biff Daley? He could not understand. Why had he suddenly yielded? He had said No and No: sudden when the battle was won, he had yielded! It was so out of perspective, so unnatural, absurd.—I am Clarence Lipper, sober, loving husband of my wife: salesman of razors. Gentleman, he believed.—What have I done? What made him so sure he had done anything at all? It was late. He was without the present for Aimée.—Let me go home. Let him bury the truth in her dear heart. There would be nothing.

This. . . He sat in a room, three doors away from where his wife sat also, waiting. This. . . —I sit with a woman, an ugly, battered, miserable woman, while my wife waits. . . He sat drinking.

There was a meaning. He had drunk with her. He could not understand.

Everything was strange, and everything was real that was strange. He had drunk her wine, and she was nothing to him. Three doors away, waited his love and his wife. Let this woman dispose! Since, howsoever, he could not understand.

She filled his glass.

"Now . . . for the second toast?" she asked him, timidly.

But she was hideous and foul. He was sure. This he could understand. This at least. And

City Block

his own misery. He could not drink. He forgot what this drink was for. He clasped his hands about his head, and he wept.

For long he wept. Of one thing only he was sure: this woman before whom he wept meant nothing and was foul—with whom he sat drinking away his Christmas Eve. So he did not find it strange that while he wept she sat very still beside him on her chair, saying no word.

He looked up.

Her eyes were gently placed on his, as if they had been there patient, while he wept, waiting for his to rise. He knew her sort. He did not find this strange.

His own life, his own gay lovely life . . broken so wantonly, so swiftly . . here was strangeness enough. No use to find strangeness in a miserable woman.

His mouth was full of tears. Words came. Rounded and easy words, through the tears of his mouth. All the words of his tearful story. And it was natural to speak.

She sat very still while he spoke. His head was down. His eyes were on the floor. At times his eyes lifted to the glass on the table. Then again they fell. So he spoke, easefully. She sat with hands folded in her lap. Faintly, her head moved back and forth in cadence with his words.

There was little to tell. It took him a long time to tell it. It was a great thing to him.

City Block

"Ivory," she repeated.

"Now nothing—nothing—and late. . ."

She was up. She wavered timidly at the door. She seemed to plead, to be preparing to plead, as she asked him:

"Will you wait? I won't be long. Please wait."

She left him.

He remained, bent forward, his elbows on his knees, head down. He saw the floor. He saw the drink he had not touched . . the second toast . . *her* Merry Christmas.

He saw, slowly, that she was standing above him: that she was placing something for him to behold, under his eyes.

She withdrew it, drawing his eyes to the table where she placed the thing she wanted him to see.

"They are old," she said, "they are lots better than new. . .

"They have not been used for over twenty years," she said. "And then they were used but a few times by a girl . . a girl as lovely as could be. They were a Christmas gift from her husband . . the first year they were married."

"They were," she said, "too precious, she thought, to be used."

She lifted a silver brush-and-comb from crinkling paper.

"I think they're quite lovely," she said. "They'll do. . And look! what luck! I was so afraid I'd not find a decent box. This one is perfect."

Clarence was up.

City Block

"That . . silver brush-and-comb!"

"Antique," she said. "Much choicer than the modern. Look at 'em. Fresh and clean. . . Like her."

"But I can't——"

"You must!"

She took the brush and comb from his bewildered hands. She thrust them peremptorily into the box. With wilful fingers, she wrapped her package, tied it.

"There." She waved her hands . . they seemed very free and light; it was as if she felt them so as she waved them.

"Now, go home. Quick. Say anything you like." She studied him. "Better say nothing. Let her think you were delayed . . let her forget to think with looking at her gift."

The box was in his hands: his hat and his coat also.

"I don't understand," he rebelled.

She smiled . . dim eyes suddenly bright and filling a dim face.

Then she was serious.

"This is Christmas Eve," was her answer. Impalpably, she pressed him to the door.

TWO
MURDER

AT the hall's one end two doors, dim with the light that comes through wired glass: making of all a cross with black tree, short luminous arms.

In one moment, the two doors opened. Two women closed them and stood, shadows against frail light . . looked at each other.

Each thought:—She too is going to have a child! “I haven’t seen you before. We just moved in,” the tall woman smiled: the smile spoke.

The short woman smiled but her smile was in the dark. . .

They walked down stairs feeling each other’s steps. The short stout woman careful of her steps, she was shy. She felt in her back this other . . not like her name she had read on the vestibule plate: *Breddan*. —She don’t seem Irish. The front door let them out. Sunshine vibrant and shrill, full of moats, full of wagons and dirt and children and themselves dancing there against the dark house and each other. The tall woman faced her. —She is lovely, she is like her voice. . .

1

Anna Suchy opened the door. Sophie Breddan stood still against the little woman’s silence, she understood it: she came in. Anna was thinking,

City Block

often since that first meeting she had thought: —I wonder, could she like me? We are both Czech. But she is married to a swell Irish politician, my Michael's a subway guard. I wonder, could she like me?

"Will you mind coming this way?" She led Sophie Breddan back to a dim kitchen: brown wall paper sucked away its light. She did not say that their front light room was rented to Mr Kandro.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," said Sophie.

"O no, I was sewing."

"I brought mine along too. We can sew together." . .

Often they sewed together. . .

Sophie's flat was all hers—just her man and hers. It was full of light. Next door on that side was the empty lot and the windows had sun, not alley. It was finer in Sophie's apartment. But Sophie never said, having once just stopped from saying: "Come over always, Anna. The light's so much better." They exchanged visits.

Their men did not count: they did not speak of their men. Anna was afraid of meeting an Irish politician: Sophie had no feel of the being of Michael Suchy. It was not these things. Simply—they looking at one another, feeling the sacrament of their own life in one another, feeling themselves so—their men did not count.

They were not solemn, feeling herself in the other. They were like trees in the Spring, giving forth bloom. So Anna chattered. She sat there

City Block

plump, far back in her rocker, rocking. Her feet did not touch the floor when she leaned far back and chattered. White stockings brimmed over the wrinkled shoes. They were like her chatter. Above them a grey dress: a round bare flat face with blue eyes, sharp like her chattering that came from a silence in her, solid and sure like her grey-covered body. Sophie sat at her sewing machine: while Anna chattered, listening Sophie hummed. Naked arms, thin, very long upon the wood and the white cloth. Black hair drawn tight and knotted to the neck. Lips full against her slender all, red lips upon paleness: lips clear and blooded as if fine steel had chiselled their edge.

Sophie turned her face, unmoving her naked arms: then Anna saw her eyes like slow fires buried within a snow at night. Sophie worked and hummed: Anna felt her eyes. —She likes me, she likes me. . . In knowledge of that, Anna chattered like an infant at play in a warm high crib.

.

Sophie went to bed.

There was a doctor: two doctors: three. . . A trained nurse. A husband fluttering ever near, unapproachable, unapproached, like flesh of a man caught in a whirling wheel. . . There was a dead boy.

Sophie lay on, at the wheel's center, still: drop by drop life that had gushed from her came hesitant back.

City Block

She could reach out a hand, take another hand and press it, press almost a smile to her lips . . . not her eyes yet. She could feel sorry for her man, and suffer for him, feel her suffering not enough for his, and stroke at last quite naturally his pain as she must have her child's misery who was dead. She was able to ask for Anna. Then Anna went to bed.

Anna's child was a girl . . . seven pounds . . . Hilda. Sophie lying grey in her bright room knew how Hilda had come into that dark other flat as the sun always noiselessly into her own. There was night, there was day: so easily.

Sophie placed her cool hands on her hot eyes. So she lay, behind and yet within herself. Swaying. Swaying within her arms and slender hands. She had a sense of her man in the other room, sitting in a chair and trying to reason.

"We must be sensible," she was sure he said to himself. Sensible. His boyish face was less ruddy, his lips she knew were a little twisted. Twisted and pale with being sensible. There were diagonal furrows on his brow with being sensible. His nails were bitten to the quick with being sensible. He was all tortured and out of himself with being calm there, sensible. Sophie stretched her body very long in her hot bed, down to where it was cooler: she forgot Victor. She stretched her feet, lying upon her back, in order to be longer. She was suddenly at peace. Her arms were at her side, very flat: her palms lay upward upon each

side of her face. Her face and her palms looked upward. Her lips were parted. Her face and palms, her mouth looked upward: her face and her mouth were warm with happy tears.

"I will be strong—right away—very soon. Next time it will be good: go well." She slept.

Victor Breddan sat tense in his chair and relived the talk he had had with Doctor Lacey. He sat very tense at work, making up his mind.

This was a blow and he resented it. He did not know, but he resented Sophie who had brought it upon him. An unknown, unsought, gaugeless element, his resenting, to merge in the making up his mind.

Victor was very young, successful. He was the Confidential Clerk of Supreme Court Justice Targett, and Justice Targett too was young for one in his position, ambitious for more. He liked Victor, Victor knew. . and there was a high way before them they must travel together. Victor sat still in his chair, and leaned on the vision that was easily his, as if it had been himself, of Justice Targett writing a decision.

It was impossible to bring the doctor to a commitment. "I do not know, I cannot say . . whether Mrs Breddan should be again subjected to childbirth." . . There was a risk, and yet perhaps this was a mere mischance. One can't be sure . . one cannot be too careful. She is young, healthy. . . And yet there's a risk. . . Always, perhaps? Better wait. . . The doctor did not feel he could be respon-

City Block

sible. . . Why not let matters drift for a while? was the retreat of the doctor.

Victor had ideas of his own. The vagueness of Doctor Lacey came into the form of them like a gas, filled them. Victor sat there, filling his mind that was already a form.

Victor was sure he loved his wife, and almost he had lost her. His savings were wiped out, there were debts: he needed savings. Beyond was the highway he must be travelling with Justice Targett: a highway with high barriers where one needed to pay high tolls. Risk, shock, wastage. So this had been: so at least for the time of the crucial years of his career ahead, it must not be again.

Victor Breddan sat in a calm body. His chestnut hair rose like an ordered hedge from his narrow forehead. His mouth was pursed. A dimple in his chin. His hands were clasped on a knee.

Then his shoulders moved upward. He got up stiff. He undressed. He folded away his clothes. He lay beside his wife.

She was moving warmly through a water of deep sleep. Sleep laved her, it was passionate soft like the touch of her child within her self, like her hand laid on her swelling stomach. Now, a cold current cutting like silver through the dark sea of her sleep. . . She awoke. Victor beside her. He slept soundly: he had filled up his mind.

Rose from her bed and moved about her world a tall gaunt woman with lips cut as by steel, with lips moveless as she spoke. She lived: the world called Sophie, called Mrs Breddan: she answered the world.

Her husband was calm with his filled-up mind. Each morning he went down town, at evening returned laden with papers and a weighted silence under all his words. Her husband was full with his ambitious life. She came to know the hard will of her husband. . . She did not understand, but she felt that it was cruel. She received his cruelty, the seed of fear that lives in cruelty like a seed in a hard shell she received also. She was a woman, she was a receiver of seed. She was a woman who needed other seed than the hard will of her husband.

He lay beside her at night. He was very near and aloof: a dull knife that her love threw herself upon, and that would not cut her. She was all whole: like a knot she lay writhed beneath her man who would not cut her and loose her. She went forth from him into the hammering world: it also would not loose her. She was in no way burst open.

Anna Suchy kneaded her bread, nursed her child: with stout strong arms she held and released her husband. She was a multitude of duties. Her eyes were a little closer upon the bareness of her face. She had no time to visit Sophie in her flat. Sophie

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came more and more to her, explainless, silent.

Anna was glad. She bustled and chattered about the silence of her friend like a flock of sparrows about a branch in winter. Wherever her duties took her, Sophie was willing to be. Sophie lived in the need of helping, helping no matter how with Hilda. But Anna was a woman and a mother, simple and elemental beyond help. She had her nest to build, her child to nurture: like any female: built to work alone. Motherhood came from Anna's fingers like its intricate web from a spider's spinnerets. Sophie sat silent: at times she held the child, placed her in the crib, moved the crib. She sat with still eyes following the mother's hands and lips as she washed the baby.

Sophie came to swing with a dull beat between her emptiness and her friend's fullness. She dwelt nowhere. Neither her world nor the other world could she take wholly to her. She swung, dully. Her mouth was very still. Her eyes, seeking, swung contrariwise to her imprisoned body. She was in conflict: a slow dizziness came to live within the eyes of Sophie.

.

She knew that Anna loved her. She was thankful. She was thankful as a mute creature, as a cat is thankful who gleans of a strange creature's love the right to lie by a stove. And Anna in her love for Sophie was moved out of herself: out of her comfort, out of her domain: into a world of limit-

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less horizon whither her mind and her instincts could not follow. Her care for child and man was of her flesh. It fitted, it was herself, it was within her like her heart that went on working. Her love for Sophie was not of her: it stood upon her. Sheer and separate it stood where God had placed it. Her love of man and child was buried in her like a heart: it did not see, it had no need of seeing. Her love for this woman who came and did nothing and was silent was an Eye upon her. It looked out. It beheld. But what it beheld it could not bring to Anna's mind in words. For Anna had no understanding of the beholding of her love. She could be only gentle to her friend, and chatter cheerily: see and be sorry how Sophie was unhappy.

Sophie walked westward through the high brimming Block . . . through others growing gradually neater, harsher, less alive . . . to the Park.

She sat among children.

They wreathed about her in curves and flares of movement that had her heart for center. They were about her as her feelings within her. Little boys with serious mouths, in leather leggings and fur caps; little girls, gold-curled, bundled in blue wool . . . played, shouted, leaped like particles of light in a concentric rainbow. Sophie sat still in the cold air, on the cold bench, feeling their luminous warmth.

Aside her, on benches, thrust away from her world, nurses in hard lines. She saw them talking

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among themselves, sufficient among themselves, opaque to children. Hard voices thrust back, to the world of children, orders. Voices of women were brittle and weak beside this chaos of colors.

Sophie's agony was bright with the dancing colors of children. Her agony was her life: she sat cold and still, but there was her agony within the flames of children, her life . . burning her, making her yet warm.

Nurses were long strokes blotting. They covered something Sophie could not see. . .

Across the walk, alone, sat a nurse in blue. Blue cape caught her slender shoulders. Blue brimless bonnet, tucked with white organdie bow beneath white pointed chin . . sat clear on clear hair. Sophie's eyes met eyes that drew her. She crossed and sat with the nurse on the green bench. She said no word. Sophie and the nurse felt each other, saying no word.

A boy played with a hoop. He beat it savagely with his stick when it refused to roll: he got on his knees to beat it savagely. He beat at the heart of Sophie. . .

Suddenly she said: "The mothers—all the mothers of all these children—what do they do? Where are they? They're not all working, are they?—they're not all dead? . ."

The blue nurse did not turn.

"All dead," she answered.

"All dead" was a high hard stroke of cloud, it beat, it broke the dancing of the children. . . Chil-

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dren bled and drooped . . children danced no more. . . "All dead."

Sophie got up. She walked away, slow.

She walked away from a world whose heart she was. She could no longer bear this being its heart. She walked away from her heart, she walked to her flat.

She opened, shut the door. She sat in a chair. She was not conscious of her passage from the Park.

It was late morning. She did not stir. Sun placed a finger on her foot. His finger rose. His finger rose. . . It lit the matted hair on her ear. She had not stirred.

Her husband entered. She did not stir. . .

She turned her head, heavy . . looked at her man with a look so weighted it took time to reach him. He bent and kissed her.

"Tired, sweetheart?"

. . A happening before her eyes she had not known when it was born in her. A tall young man . . almost a boy . . with thick hair, thin hands, as she passes coming home through the Block, a tall blond boy—he stops: he looks at me: he is graceful standing.

—Tender inquiry in his eyes, as not now in my husband's! . . .

Sophie flung herself into her husband's arms.

She felt his hands holding her body, claiming it, drinking it, that way he had . . hands eager for themselves.

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"Me . . mel!" she cried silently in her throat.

He kissed her. He was very content. —She loves me. . .

8

Anna was small and ashamed, half suppliant, half exultant before the tense high body of her friend. Sophie's face was turned away in order not to see: now her body saw and it throbbed like steel against her naked nerves.

Anna was going to have another baby.

Coming that day into her kitchen Sophie knew this. She said nothing, her neck strained fiercely now with her averted face. She turned her eyes full to the pleading eyes of Anna: she placed her hands on Anna's shoulders. She kissed her eyes.

"Have you known long?"

"No—I—just . . ." Anna was pale, eyes brimmed. She took Sophie's hand, the other hand . . . stroked them together, held them hot against her cheek. "You are so wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"So wonderful," smiled Sophie.

Great change. Sophie no longer yearned to do caring things for Hilda. She was glad now of Anna's subjective motherhood. She did not realise, in its true terms, this change. She sat in Anna's kitchen more at peace: less hungry: peace

City Block

was nearer . . waiting, waiting . . and this she accepted, docilely, mute, as a driven beast after the work-day night.

The months went. Anna was heavier, more languid: she allowed her friend to do more things for her. She allowed her to sweep the kitchen, to bring fresh water to the room of Mr Kandro. She allowed her to scrub the floors. She gave her orders. When Sophie broke a dish: "My! how can you be so careless?"

Sophie was in peace. She did not look at Hilda. She came at length not even to look at Anna. Nearly all days, as the time grew near, she came to Anna and helped her. She needed to be near her . . near her in order to be waiting, in order to find the heart of waiting. . . She needed not to see her. She helped her.

.

Sophie hated children.

She walked to the Park through the summer streets that were lush with them, that were a surge and a delirium of children; streets overflowed with shimmering boys and girls, streets banked with heavy women, walled with arrogant women's bellies. But she walked always on. She walked as if she had been swimming through a sea. If she stopped she must sink. No Park bench, no heat, no shade of a thick tree could make her stop. . . Until she was in her flat, limp, with dry eyes and with a skin scorched by the passion she had walked through.

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Walking, she did not perspire. Seated still, she was soon drenched with sweat.

She saw the tall man—almost a boy, finely tall—with thick hair, thin hands, whose eyes, looking at her, gave her a tender touch. She did not look at him straight, he was in her mind. He had a long, gentle face, pointed chin, blue eyes. He was good somehow in his rough shirt and his rough tweed suit and his heavy shoes that showed the grace of his ankles. He was frightened of her. He was like a woman. He was this boy, forever sweet in her averted mind where he stood aloof, slenderly, silent. . .

. . . He walked direct in her path. She was flanked by warring children, earnest as only children. They were both blocked by children. They had to stand, facing each other, till the tangle unswarmed.

She saw him blush. His face was close. His eyes went out to hers, asking a question. Her lips that were always moveless quivered.

"You are unhappy," she heard him.

Her breathing was brutal strokes against her breast . . against an iron bar clamped on her breasts.

"Can't we go to the Park . . and talk it over?" She heard him above the clamor of her breathing.

"No: I am married." She heard herself beneath the clamor and weight of her breathing.

"But you're unhappy!" She thought her breast would break with this clamor of her breathing. . .

City Block

She saw his eyes holding her. She saw his mouth part, break with indecision. Her breathing lessened. The iron bar was tight. Since his mouth was so, she was able to pass him.

. . . She said to herself: "Am I unhappy?"

She said to herself: "Why should I . . . just I . . . be unhappy so?"

Then her thought turned: "I am unhappy."

She was afraid. Each time this thought came to her came, too, the young man who had taught her. She did not want this. She put away the thought—thought of the young man also. All her thought, all her feeling were deep tangled in this thought. She came, more and more, more and more easily, to put away all her thought, all her feeling.

When she saw him in the Block, it was she who looked at him, like reaching down for a Word that she had buried. It was he who could not look straight: his face was clouded: turning away from her his face, he turned into some inner shadow.

.

Anna went to bed, her child was a splendid girl, they christened her Louisa.

Sophie shut one dim door, the hall was a black stroke upon her cheek, she opened the other door. It was late afternoon and she must prepare her husband's supper. She had been with Anna who lay in bed, very moist, very chatterful, eager to get up. For Anna's feet and hands knew how to do things. But her tongue was awkward. It was easier to do

City Block

than to tell Sophie how. She was hot and moist and comfortless in bed: healthy already: ready again to begin.

She was cross with Sophie, giving her difficult orders, cross also with Mr Kandro who came early in order to be of use, these days with Anna in bed. The big dark man moved noiselessly about, trying to be of use. The tops of his cheeks gleamed white about the massed black beard: the white of his eyes gleamed under toppling brows. He was gentle and stupid; when Anna was cross he smiled at Sophie, and Sophie who almost never smiled felt warm and smiled—she couldn't to him—at Anna.

"Do you think Louisa is a pretty name?" Sophie asked Victor.

"It will do. Why?"

"That's what they've called—Suchy's new little girl."

Victor felt vaguely a strangeness in Sophie's choice of words: their dim recording of a world infinitely beyond his mind. He was cheerful tonight: he had many things to say: all else faded.

"Well dear, I've good news. I can get named for Assemblyman if I want to! And there's money in the Bank."

He got up, he stood behind Sophie's chair, he placed his hands about her throat: "Now you tell me, do I want it?"

His hands were a little heavy. Sophie was glad she could say:

"You are choking me, Victor."

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He slipped his grasp to her chin, tilted her head.

"It's up to you. You decide, Darling. You decide everything. Shall I go to the Assembly?"

"What do they do in the Assembly?"

"Don't you know? Make laws."

"You will make laws?"

He leaned and kissed her forehead. He was very sure of himself, sure of his wife, sure of the kind of laws he would help make in the Assembly.

"Well?"

"Laws are funny things," said Sophie.

"Women are funny things," Victor, a little hurt, stepped away.

"Women are serious things. . . Or aren't they?" . . . She got up.

"Tell me, Victor," she said, "tell me . . of course, dear, I want you to go to the Assembly."

He sat and pulled her down to him, and placed her on his knees. She was stiffly erect. She was as tall as he, her head now above him. Above the neat containment of his profile, her full face was smothered flame. But she did not burn him. He smiled, living in his neat life, thinking in his neat thoughts, speaking in his well-ordered words. She burned in smother.

His plans . . his ambitions. He must remain free as he was . . free of debts, free of worry. With her whole to stand by him and share his plans, his ambitions. As he spoke, her head moved up and down, slowly, jerkily, in a sort of sardonic rhythm with his words. Her breasts ached.

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She got up. She placed her two forefingers stiff against his eyes so that he needed to shut them.

"What would you do," she said, "if I put out your eyes?"

He laughed.

She pressed her two forefingers. She felt the bulb of his eyes give in. She withdrew her fingers into fists. Fists very hard and fierce beat against her breasts, again and again, in silence, where they ached. He did not hear their beating—with shut eyes.

4

Victor, high-keyed and glowing as never before, was drab to Sophie as never before. He was out of her world: he was happy and strong as she had never made him in the earliness of their love, when he was a boy laying his head on her lap and letting his fingers blindly stray to her face, to her mouth which kissed them. It was terrible, seeing him a man, and turned to a world that seemed to love him since it made him glow, and that was not she. He was less hers, less lovely to her. She saw him come in, bright-eyed, sharp-worded, in new clothes smart, he was drab to her. He told her of his nomination, she stood as a stranger willing to applaud as if that had been all he could want further of her. He spoke of his meetings, of his assurance of success; he showed her letters; he had hushed words for the silent work of Justice Targett. And she beheld

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him, outside the circle of her flame, like a black dead world that had been once within it. He asked her if she did not wish to come to the campaign meetings, she answered yes . . . and knew for the first time she had lied to her man.

He did not press her. He was too happy in himself, letting this new world tune him up and away.

.

She was alone now evenings, also, alone. She lay on her back, dressed, on her bed, and tried to recall a world in which it seemed to her she had been alive. A world to which she woke with sunlight dancing under her eyelids. A world in which, walking from her flat to the street, there was purpose and cheer. A world in which it was natural to take food in order to go on living in it: natural to love in order to feel that she was living in it. A world in which the hours, for all the pain they held, pointed hopeward, sunward: where though at times the earth was packed with pain, about the earth was the Air, all about: infinite spaces full of the Sun. . . . She lay on her back and reached for her man who was hers, who had his hands upon her and his lips. She could grasp nothing. Her mind was dull. It had a way of stopping upon a crack in the wall as if it had been an abyss.

She left Anna alone. She lay on her bed, she sat in her chair. When Victor was not to be home to supper, often she cooked no food for herself.

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Once when the bell rang, and she knew it was Anna, she did not get up.

.

Anna said to herself: "Sophie is very busy with her husband. He is running for the Election. She must be helping him or something." Anna did not believe this, she did not know what she believed: this she managed to say to herself. It was enough.

She was busy. Louisa was a big child for her four months. Already she gave her a little milk from the bottle each day. The hands and the feet of Anna forever at work in her rooms did not miss Sophie. Her eyes missed her: but her eyes spoke feebly, when her hands and her feet were at work.

She sat, half turned away from the kitchen table. In her hand was a large piece of buttered bread and cheese. In her lap lay easefully balanced a cup of coffee. Cake was on the table. Close to the door which was the safest place sat Hilda who was two: looking at her mother, crooning and begging for food.

"No, you—you have had your lunch. Let Mama eat, once, won't you? You'll get so fat, you, I won't have room for you here. . . I'll have to put you in the street if you eat all the time. . . Do you want me—you—to put you in the street?"

Hilda forged across vast spaces to the table. Her hands beat against the wooden leg that held the top that held the cake she needed. Anna gave her a piece. It crumbled against Hilda's rosy

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mouth and fell. Hilda followed to the sight of her feet where the cake lay ready. She was satisfied. An occasional glance up the table leg where was the table top and the cake—when these crumbs were gone.

Anna talked with her mouth full of cake and coffee. She was very soft and comfortable in her kitchen: her grey dress was warm like the skin of her cheeks.

"You'll be a fatty!" she warned. "There." With a fat shoe she shoved a piece of the cake into Hilda's reach.

The door opened.

Anna thrust her coffee away and jumped up, startled.

"Michael!"

Michael was not due until late that evening. But still it was he. Solid and heavy and sure, he stood in the door.

"It's me," he announced.

"What has happened!" Anna's mind raced through the catastrophes that his standing there excluded. Her children were alive, Louisa slept in her crib, Michael was alive also—not sick, not injured.

"They telephoned me . . . when I got to the Barn they give me the message. It's Papa."

"He's dead?"

"Max says for us to come right over, while he's alive. I came back."

He stood there, his cap in a fat hard hand, turn-

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ing a round face upon his commanding wife. His face was slightly tilted to one side, and his eyes moved from Anna to the floor. Anna knew he was suffering. He was ill at ease in suffering. Almost, he was embarrassed. He looked a little as he looked to her when, for a reason connected with his food, he sulked. But he was warmer, more like a child: in his own soul, was softer than when he sulked.

Her mind worked.

"I can get Sophie. We can be back . . . when do you think?"

"In a few hours. Only we go there and see him. I can wait till he dies. You don't have to."

He blocked the door. She had to take him by the hand, lead him to a chair. His eyes looked diagonally down to the floor about Hilda, inattentive, who cried against the imperviousness of table legs upon whose top was cake. So he sat: Anna rang Sophie's bell.

She rang it again, again.

Sophie stood before her with swollen eyes as if she had slept. She wore a dark blue wrapper. It was open at the front: Anna saw that Sophie was half dressed. She wore no corsets.

It went through her mind that Sophie looked sick—or funny. She knew the inconsequence of illness in a woman, when a duty speaks.

"Sophie," she said, "my man's papa—he's dying—over in Brooklyn. We got to go. I'll be back by supper. Will you come over and take care of Louisa? Just for a few hours, Sophie dear. There's

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milk over the stove to give to her—at five. I have just nursed her. That's enough. She'll sleep most likely all the time. Will you come?"

"Right away?"

"Right away."

Sophie shut the dim door behind her. They stepped in unison across the hall. The other door received them.

Anna stuffed her body into a coat, found her hat. She changed her shoes. She had few clothes for going out.

"I'll take Hilda into the bedroom to be near the baby," Sophie thought. She looked long at the man who stood in the hall, fingering his cap, with eyes forever diagonally downcast.—Father of children. She said no word to him. He bowed, and she said no word, she looked away, saw him still:—father of children.

She was alone . . behind the other door.

She stood a moment, looking where they had left. She felt alone. She pinned her wrapper high at her throat. She remembered the children with whom she was alone . . not alone then. —*In my own flat alone: not here.* . . There, with the truth of loneliness, she had come not to feel it. Here, where there were many things, many voices, lives, she was not alone, she felt lonely.

A faint shiver ran from her stomach to her shoulders. She jerked it off through her ears. She walked into the kitchen. Hilda looked at her, suspended in her ceaseless hopeful effort to reach the

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top of a table where there was cake. Sophie took a bit of the cake, placed it firmly in Hilda's palm. She lifted her.

"Hold on tight, now," she said. She carried her out.

Through the hall of the flat she looked to the front room of Mr Kandro. She noticed that it was far away . . she did not think it strange that it should seem so. His door was open. Sunlight was sharp there like a flame burning on a black stick. It made her know that she had on a wrapper and that she was not presentable if she should meet him in the hall: she forgot that she had met already Anna's man, and that she could certainly run over to her flat, get a dress, put it on in the Suchy bedroom. —I have left my key! It was instinct, before she shut her door, to feel that she had her key. This time she had shut it, not feeling.

She went into the bedroom of the Suchys.

She forgot key and wrapper. The shade was up, the room breathed quietly. A brown light, very full in the room, was its breath like Anna's breathing that came also full from all her body.

Sophie closed the door at her back, stood still, holding Hilda in her arms. There was the double-bed, covered with a great patch quilt. The bed was quiet and proud: the quilt with its blacks and reds was vibrance making the bed move . . lifting it, bringing the corners of the room into a sort of wooden dance. At the bed's side was a low cot: at its foot the baby, Louisa, slept in her open crib.

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There was a bureau, littered. There was a rocking chair.

Dominant the bed. Under the arrogant vibrance of its quilt lived depths. Depths quiet. Sleep of a man and woman, sleeping and waking together. Birth. Still moment before birth—just a moment was it in her long perspective—when man gave wholly, shattered, gave himself, the world that was his, the world and its infinite reaches forward and back—and when woman took. . .

Sophie went quietly to the rocker, still holding Hilda: sat down. The child was hushed. She held her cake in her tight fist. She did not eat of it. Her eyes were wide. She held her body upright in the woman's arms. She was hushed.

Sophie faced toward the crib and the bed. She remained very quiet, long. She arose. She placed Hilda upon the cot. The child lay docilely on her back, her eyes still wide. Sophie crossed to the bed's other side. For a moment she peered toward the window. Then she lay down, softly, upon the bed. She did not touch the pillows: her face was flat below them: her body was at an angle. The palms of her hands moved measuredly at her side, up and down, rubbing the quilt, as if they sought the quiet deep beneath it.

Her hands came to rest. She slept.

Hilda's eyes closed also, above her little cot. She slept. . .

The baby awoke . . and began to cry.

The baby cried low, in measure, as if she were

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prepared to cry a long time. She cried a long time.

The baby's voice was a little green vine stringing its way across the brown breath of the room. It clambered up into the air: it lay athwart the window: it drooped upon the bed, touching Sophie's hands with its tender shoots. It touched her ears that slept beneath her hair.

Sophie awoke. She saw the room full of the green tracery of the baby's crying.

"Yes, yes."

She arose. She took Louisa from her crib, smoothing her dresses. She took her to the chair and held her against her bosom and began to rock.

Louisa cried. Her crying was the small white buds upon the vine.

"Yes, yes," said Sophie.

She held the baby forward in her arms and looked at her. She placed her lips on the wet cheeks, on the blinking eyes, on the hair.

"Yes, yes."

Holding her to one side, with her right hand she loosed her wrapper. She let fall her left breast free from its scant sheath. Very tenderly, very closely, with eyes far away, she held the baby against it.

Louisa's crying was red small flowers upon the green of her hunger.

"Yes, yes," Sophie crooned again. She pressed the baby closer. The crying was a flame running fast.

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Sophie thrust her forward upon her lap. The baby lay there, upon her back, her fists crumpled, her face tortured: a leaping passion she lay there.

Sophie's hands were very fierce, very swift. She tore the wrapper from her shoulders. Down to her waist she rent away her clothes. Her shoulders were sharp and white. Her breasts . . small, pear-shaped, firm . . were the breasts of a tall virgin.

Once more she gathered the baby from the torn clothes that lay about her on her lap: held her close. The nipples stood sheer. She crushed Louisa against them.

The infant wailed: Sophie pressed more close. The wail was a shriek.

Sophie had no sense of her self separate from this life upon her. She had no sense of its shriek above the shriek of her flesh. She folded her arms about the infant and crushed her close, feeling her breasts crush, bruise, feeling her breasts swell out and encase the child and the shriek. She drew her hands about her naked shoulders, she pressed with her hands and with her throat, with all her imprisoning self she pressed, that had so long pressed in, what now was sweetly escaping. She moved up and down in her chair, pressing, pressing.

"Yes, yes," she said. And the child's shriek was over.

"Yes, yes." . . .

In the silence, she knew that what had been within, so long, so terribly was now outside her. A sagging, a cutting thing within, breaking her

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back, clamping her throat, tugging the flesh of her breasts—now warm, now a being, now a babe, at her breast. And her self flowing upon it, giving it blood and milk.

She sat rocking, crooning. The rocking ceased, then the crooning.

She sat with wide eyes, wide lips, faintly upturned in a smile. . .

Darkness came like smoke into the room, filling at last all of it with a black stir save the room's center which was still and 'glowed and was a woman . . a half naked woman clasping a child's body.

THREE

THE TABLE

RUDD stopped and saw the house in which he lived. He had lived there years, he had not seen it before. It was high and its red-brick front was soiled: on the fourth floor of it, hidden among close halls, in layers of life, was his flat and his life. For the first time he knew of his flat—a place among others in a house among others. For the first time he knew of his life. —Does this mean, dimly he sensed, it is gone? . . . Rudd threw his head up, placed his hands in his pockets. With his shoulder, he pressed the door. He went up the stairs.

A spare tall man with grey eyes and heavy hands, a rhythm of muscle beneath the drab of his suit; a man with thin lips above a jaw that was sheer yet gentle; a man with shock of auburn hair to his creaseless brow . . . stood in the threshold of his flat and changed. His shoulders stooped, brow folded, his eyes grew dim. The strong hands wavered faintly up and down. In the inner room, the hard breathing of his wife.

So she had lain for weeks. Breathing hard at night: now night and day breathing hard. He stood alone in the bare room, separate by a door from the hard breathing of his wife. It had begun to fill his life with its stertorous mock: it was crowd-

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ing out joy, gaiety, assurance . . the permanent sweet past he must now face was dead.

He stood. . . Long moments. He crossed and opened the door.

—This is she! This is Mary! A woman lay in the mussed bedding. The pillows were cold blue white against her yellow face. The window was shut. The air was thick and soft, it smelt of sickness . . a sort of thing it was like dirty velvet.

—This is she!

Her hair was matted back from the brow flecked red. Her mouth was open and her eyes were shut. Dark lids. There was an ugly draw upon her lips: —I have kissed them. They were brown. One hand was hidden, one hand clutched harshly at the heavy nightgown upon the breast.—I have kissed it. It rose and fell with a leaden rigor.

“She is asleep,” he muttered. He shut the door: turned his back to the door and to the room behind it.

He went to the bare kitchen table in the bare room’s center. He sat down. . .

Shoulders tremorously drawn, hands clenching widening, eyes a-flash then bathed in their own hot repression, made him the picture of a man who has been insulted. He was insulted. This was his growing mood. Without reason, without warning, grossly insulted! And as if ropes bound him, he must sit and take the offense.

—Good years, where are you? Years so true, so

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steady! The one true thing! The kitchen gleams and the lads come in eager. Dinner is ready. The lips of Mary are ready for my own. You are dim . . I will not remember you, yet you invade me, lovely years, like a foe. . .

—The kitchen sings grey. There is a veil on our home, a veil of mourning. The flat has fallen down into the grey house of many flats upon a dirty street!

Rudd's eyes were above the table, took in the steady rough grain of the wood that was just below them and that so quickly ran beyond his eyes.

Last Christmas they danced at the Ball. They danced together. —The sun came, made the other women look like painted pictures smudged. The sun came, made my Mary glow like the sun! . . or like the flowers she cared for in the bedroom window. The flowers have died. They went home singing, silently though it was. For all the night they had been dancing together, though the men made faces and the women too. Rudd was sure of that, for Mary told him. Ay, the women too. Such a wife . . such was his wife.

And to her . . like a flower slender, pretty, with round freckled face, blue eyes, to her who had chosen him from a full field . . he must bring a Doctor! Dark dank blight on her truth . . a lie of darkness making her truth less true. And again a Doctor, and again . . and again.

The Lodge doctor he has discharged. For he

City Block

shook his head, he looked down at his womanish hands: "I wish I could encourage you, Rudd. I'll be back tomorrow." . . . Such nonsense, innumerable instances of that, with which he built up his practice as bricks build up to a wall: was his clean Mary to be a brick in a doctor's grey wall of alarms? —Get out!

The other doctor came: a money man. And Rudd working nights to pay his daily visits . . the visit twice a day . . and the same long face (paying for that), same shake of a learned head, same hateful pious clasping of white hands. . .

Not yet did Rudd believe. What frightened him was that he could not so steadfastly deny. To do so, needed an ever more strenuous summoning of will. He did not dare to discharge this doctor. He worked at night, he joked with the lads. And since to be with Mary much was to face the doctor's truth, he did not dare that either. Work helped in this. But the fine edge of Mary's consciousness was already blurred, so that perhaps this did not make her suffer.

Then sudden . . the burst of a storm through a splintered door . . belief in what the doctor meant did come. Rudd's spirit crumpled, collapsed.

Why work at night? It was only a matter of time before the end? What is in time is there already. Clear! Would he care for funds then?

. . . The hard wood table with its steadfast grain. Rudd's eye on the table. Good food on it, these many years. His hands on it laughing. And

City Block

Mary's hand seeking his. And Andy's and Jack's . . and the laughter of them all, and the joy of them all . . and their *right!* . . their lives, one life, wreathing above a table.

The table was steadfast. He had never thought of this. —Tables come, tables go. I have made a table in an hour. Better tables than this. A poorer carpenter than I could make a better table. For tables come and go. My happiness, that is the permanent Thing. Mary and the lads in me. My eyes, my heart that beats eternally. For when it beats no more, the world claps out. . . The table is still there!

At first there was a sly side knowledge helping him. Helping him help the boys to their food, Mary to her medicine and the rest. Through all, stirring in his mind this thought: “—it's a joke. Life's playing a joke on me. It's a joke and will pass.” *Next-door* was this stirring thought like a sound one hears from the sunny real world . . the world is real and the sun! . . when one is lost in a dream and the dream is bad.

—For this counts most! Carpenter? Rudd's trade, and he was deft at it, was nothing in his life beyond a capable and steady means to what was everything. He took pride in his work. He had a greater pride.

And here was Mary failing in her part of it! That's past the joking stage. A man loses his job and the like. Things happen. That's life. But this? That's past a joke! . . Rudd sits at the old

City Block

table, anger and resentment flood in him: they are about him where had been good hands and wreathing laughter.

The door opens. A boy, tall for his eight years . . a slight fine lad with very great deep eyes and golden hair making them dark and deep, stands in the door with his brother who is stocky and short for six. Andy and Jack are home from play in the street. Andy lays away his books, Jack his ball, with a new quietness. They see their father: a bowed strange man it is, bowed over the kitchen table. They do not speak to him. Their feet patter past. They go in to their mother.

Rudd was glad. He was uncomfortable in their presence. What lowered over the home was a loss to them. Yet a loss in some lights may be an honorable thing. They, little boys, could not feel it as a slur. But since it was a slur to himself, so palpable, Rudd felt that his sons must feel it. And this was unbearable . . that his sons should see him humiliated there. This, why he was glad when the two lads went to their mother. This, why he could not follow.

The boys felt the stressed reserve in their suddenly strange father and left him alone. Their voices were low and their eyes vagrant, in their home.

They had been born close enough to life, they had sprung up vivid and vital enough in it, to have a sentiment of what was death. But also they had the candor of their youth . . the stoical acceptance

City Block

that inheres in want of space or time to conceive other. Their world, since it partook of whatever happened, was merely going on. Their father's world, since it was built on a past, is disappearing.

Rudd sits quiet at the table, and hears the door close, gently shutting out the boys and his wife: he yearns for the grief he knows he feels to overwhelm him as respite from this far more bitter sense of degradation. —Are not these the usual things of life? His mother lost three children and her husband before the beginning of his memory. She went on. Jack Fabin fell from a scaffolding and became a cripple with a cripple's mind. That fire in the next Block which had spared an old couple killed both their sons. . . These things, he found that these things now meant little. They were vague unreal puffs of an air not made to breathe. Every day he read the papers and they were filled with such calamities and jests of fortune. And they too were of a world that in no way touched his. The mishaps of those he knew, the reports in the papers, the concise dramas of the movies . . all dwelt outside alike, contactless with himself, brewing if anything a liquor of excitement that he paid pennies, nickels to partake of. Yes: even the sorrows of his friends in the last measure had heightened the reality of his own peace. Was his sorrow now doing the same for other calm spectators? Was his destruction, somewhere, a dime's worth of fun?

Rudd jumped up, his fists clenched. He sank

City Block

back to his kitchen table. He could not find this 'show', so he could not destroy it. He could only play his part. . . His thoughts were compressed and tight, slow-moving. They drove into him like a blunt mallet in the hands of a dull giant. And their direction was downward. Rudd's hands slid out over the table, his head fell on his arms. His eyes were open. His eyes took in very close the rough grain of the wood that was just below them and that so quickly ran beyond: a hard meaningless surface against his vision, which somehow in the running of the grain did have a meaning.

He thought of nothing. He felt, in the nearness of the table's surface shutting his sight, that he himself was hidden. He found security in this opaqueness. There was a soothing note to the sheer rhyme of the wood. He looked up, feeling his boys.

They stood slightly aloof, taking him in. With an angry emphasis, Rudd threw up his head.

"Well?"

He did not know what leaned him toward the yielding figures of his sons . . relief from the hard face of the table. Their tenderness drew him savagely, revengefully. Unknowing, he envied and abhorred their isolating fitness for what must come.

Andy spoke: "Mother fell asleep . . fell asleep."

His wiry body was protest to such sleep. His hand clasped his brother's. They were two protests, side by side, and suppliants before him.

City Block

Rudd saw this, gripped himself better. His weakness had escaped them.

"It's good for mother to sleep. Let her."

"It's not good!"

Jack's words. But they were not consciously his. He said what he felt, rather than what he knew. His father caught the austerity of this.

"Run for the doctor!"

Andy went.

Rudd caught Jack in his arms and lifted him to his knees. He held him straight, vising his shoulders, seeking his warm gaze. He found it. He held it. His child's spirit flowed to him.

They sat there, motionless upright. And neither of them knew, while the child sat on his father's knee, that it was he who was strong and who sustained the other. But both of them knew that the woman who slept was dead.

2

The gaunt silent eloquent remain of Rudd's pride is laid away. He thought:—When I see home again, at least it will be really empty, even if it can never again be home.

They ride to her grave and he feels how wrong he is. The lads are close about him in the carriage, like thoughts, like memories, like pain. They throb and are mute and are ubiquitous in just this way.—I am their father. That meant that he must master them. He felt his failing to. Had

City Block

he been master, they would not have been so cloying close. In all ways, riding together to the grave, they are like his senses that cling while he, knowing them bluntly, can neither understand nor cast away. They were the true remains of his life, the true point of the jest that is his life! That which rolls silently along before them with its wreath of immortelles is no longer anything at all. There is no sense in burying that. It is dead, that death! But here is another death, the death that his two boys clinging close to him are forever bringing back. That death is alive! Why can not they be buried?

But they could not be buried. They would go home with him. They would remain with him. They were like his thoughts. There was no escape from them. Even, he would have to nourish them. That which he deemed the climax of the jest was the point of its starting. It would weave into the texture of his love for the living the horror of his love for the lost. It would continue laughing slowly through his life.

The thinking of these things was a drone and a rhythm: one with the swing of the carriage wheels, one with the swing of his breath. Swathed in his thoughts, Rudd stands above the broken earth and looks into the grave. Beyond him waves the world. A fringe of trees rolls over the hill that is gold and purple in the sun. The sky glances against it and its infinite steadfastness makes a wave of the landside and a mood of the trees. The

City Block

wind runs tremulous. Rudd sees only the grave: but the wind sings in his ear and what it sings is the secret of all it has traversed to reach him. On the horizon the brow of the hill touches a cloud. And the cloud's top touches the sun. And the wind has come from the horizon. . .

So a great need in Rudd. He could escape his thoughts! He knew a way. These living growing forms of his thoughts clasping his hands? He must escape them first!

Rudd drew free his hands from the hands of his two boys. He did not look at the faces of his boys. He walked away from their faces. . .

8

Three days Rudd did not return. He wandered about. He drank enough to blunt the edge of insult cutting his nerves. He kept himself at that. He had a mist in him to dim his thoughts. But he still had the sense of their stirring, of their nearness, of the danger of their approach. He did not dare to lose this altogether. Something held him from taking liquor to that end.

His living through these days was a siege for him. Within, safe for the moment, was a self that did not see, did not hurt. Without was the bitter and beating and intolerable mass of his emotion which he had managed to thrust off . . . but there it was driving forever back toward its home within him. As the stubborn siege wore on, he knew. He

City Black

was not surprised, walking up the stair, opening the door of his flat.

Rudd stood still and pressed his mind to stillness. The flat had a vast and vacant air to his veering senses. It was not empty. About the table, Andy and Jack sat with a woman. But they were petty, out of scale. They did not figure in the empty vast flat. The table was bare and the stove was cold. A shadow came up through the window. Another shadow lay against the open threshold to the bedroom of Mary. Everything large, older than its wont. Everything swollen as by the flush of a dark fever.

The woman got up. She was a sudden challenge getting up. Large also. The boys small and still.

He knew her.—She lives upstairs . . . McDermott . . . Or was. Married or something.

She was a tall girl, facing him tenderly now.

“So you’ve come back, Mr Rudd?”

Why were the boys so quiet and so small? Were they judging him, there? Had the woman’s tenderness come down to make them judge him?

Her tenderness was sharp.

“A fine father you are! You’d ‘a’ let them starve, I suppose?”

He knew, if he saw her clear, he would see her tender and warm. If he saw the lads clear, he would see them tender and warm. He could not bring himself to see them clear. Insult and broken

City Block

pride stood stiff before him. And through them, what he saw was a woman scolding, shaming the father of his boys who sat there meekly still, their eyes away and their bodies away from their father.

"Well, you've come back," she spoke. She came close to him blocking the door. — If I see her, I see her tender and warm. . She is loving. She is full of sympathy for me. Always I have felt her glow in the hall, on the street, as she passed.

"Let me pass!"

He stirred. She was gone.

The door's shut showered out and went through Rudd like steel. It sobered him. There they were . . Andy and Jack.—If I see them I shall love them. They are warm.

But what he saw was this proof of his disgrace: their mute calm branding him more deep than the goodness of the woman who had fed and cared for his sons. He had lost his love in life. He had won this living insult? . . . This he saw.

He wanted to wipe them out . . the two frail lads who were shoots of all his love. He wanted to fall on his knees: "Forgive me! forgive me!" . . He threw up his head.

"Come lads," he steadied his voice, it had been long silent. "Come! We're going out to supper."

They got up. They put on their hats and coats. They said nothing.

As they walked down the Block, he wanted to touch his boys. He wanted to joke, he wanted to

City Block

ask them questions. They entered a restaurant in cold stillness.

.

On one side of the narrow place was a counter fitted with stools revolving on black rods. On the other side was a squad of tables bare of cloth, cluttered with cannisters and dishes and the sprawling elbows of eaters. Above the counter was a glass pasted with cardboard notices of food and prices. An unshaved man worked in a dingy apron. Another, greasier still, worked the tables. The place was thick with men and women: silence swarmed over their drab movements like a slow rotting.

Rudd and his sons sat down at an empty table. Rudd took the bill-of-fare. Here was a topic of talk where he could venture! He poured of himself, of all his broken will to be a father, into the bill-of-fare. From the food, from the printed card, he sought redemption.

"Well, lads?" he said. "What will you have to eat? Anything you want. Now make sure."

He read down the list. He stressed the good dishes . . the rich ones. He put a tinge of rhapsody gleaned from another and true pathos into his voice as he pronounced them, ". . sweetbreads on toast, veal loaf, chicken, beefsteak with onions, chicken salad, duck with applesauce . ." slurring the common meats as beneath his rite.

The boys listened with unaltered faces. Rudd

City Block

was lyric with the deserts . . "ice cream, chocolate layer-cake, meringue." . . He paused.

"I want fried eggs," said Andy.

"Me too," said Jack.

The father quavered over the abyss from his proud comedy. He feared for his balance.

"You're not hungrier than that?"

"Missy Jane gave us lots for lunch."

A waiter stood dangling above them, urging with sinuous body for an order.

"Very well," said Rudd. "Fried eggs. Three times." He did not look at the waiter. The waiter's presence was full in him and was hostile. For the waiter had stood there long, and he had heard Rudd's prandial oration . . smirked at the abyss. The poison of that smile was seeping, seeping.

"How do yez want the potatoes?" the waiter asked. His head was up also.

"How?" repeated Rudd.

"Boiled," came the answer.

"Boiled potatoes on the side," ordered Rudd. He was stiff. The other man lounged off.

There was silence.

The one topic of talk was dead. It had helped not at all.

Rudd waited, tapping the floor with his foot. He stopped. He was still altogether. His sons gazed ahead, vacantly, with their hands clasped and their eyes glistening. Then a spell came and held all three . . an air cloying and thick, unbreathable, and that they had to breathe! An air of per-

City Block

manence, and made for breathing. In its drawn chill, in its measured penetration, Rudd recognized it.

The waiter returned and laid their food before them on the table.

FOUR

FAITH

IT'S right long since I have seen you, Patrolman Pat."

"Are you alone, Luve?"

"Yes."

"I want to talk with you."

A big boyish man followed the woman into the forward room.

In the light, he said:

"Time's not treated you very decent, has it, Mrs Luve?"

She smiled.

"You know as much about that as any, Mr Broaddus."

"Yes," he answered. "You were white, Mrs Luve. You had no business—bein' in your way of business—bein' white."

He was standing, hid in his crude civilian clothes.

"They broke you good!"

"What can I do for you?" she said abruptly.

He examined her, feeling her will to close his reminiscence. At once he changed. He was no more the roundsman who had known this woman and who was superior to her in all that law and office and the world made valid. He was a boy, with blond hair, red cheeks, plump hands, lost in a discomfiture of feeling.

City Block

She saw this. "Won't you sit down?"

His hands stopped twitching. She was aware of his mouth firmly closed, as he pushed up to the unavoidable goal of his appearance before her.

"No thank you, Mrs Luve. I can tell you in few words what it is I want."

He stopped. She sat down. He saw her face, it looked as if the spirit of his club . . of all the clubs in the Force . . had beaten it. It was very small and humble: also it was sweet.

"Mrs Luve," he began, spreading his legs a bit, with high head pressing himself to words, "Mrs Luve, there's one thing I've got of my experience with you—and that's respect."

She frowned.

"When it happened, Mrs Luve, when they broke you because you wouldn't doublecross old Mangel . . I knew it was that . . I was sick about it all. I wanted to leave the Force. I told the wife. I was sick with being on the Force. But the wife . . and the boys. . ."

"I understand," said her eyes.

And there was silence. His face seemed older, dryer. His face, living again that moment of decision when he had remained in safety and his true self said No, grew older, dry: something was dying from it. She frowned, seeing his older face.

Again he changed. Years seemed to flake from him, his eyes were gentler. There came into his eyes what made her wonder.

City Block

"I want help from you, Mrs Luve. I thought of you at once. I am a married man, Mrs Luve. I've got two boys . . and there's a woman . . I love!" A boy's eyes appealed from a face that now was downcast. "God, I love her! I got to see her! We got to see each other somehow, Mrs Luve! We got to . . we got to find out what this is. . . Will you let me have a room where I can see her?"

She arose and went to the window. She looked out. She said:

"Certainly."

He was scarce boy, more child, when she turned to see him.

"There's one room you can have. I don't rent rooms, you know. But this one I scarcely ever use. It's the only one where I won't disturb you, nor you me. It's back of the kitchen. At the very back of the flat. Rather small. Warm."

"Thank you, Mrs Luve."

"I'll charge you high for it. . . Five dollars the week."

He nodded.

"Can you afford it?"

He shook his head. She smiled.

"Five dollars . . in advance."

As he moved to the door, a strain of will went outward to his hands and his mouth to master the boy, to re-establish the man. His hands merely quavered, his mouth gave these words:

City Block

"You—you know, Mrs Luvé: I'm an Officer. There's the home. I'm in your hands."

She opened the door. "Get along with you," she said.

2

The girl was a swift tremble under his arms as they went forth through the Block. He could not tremble, because she trembled.

They lifted their feet very high . . carefully in order not to stumble.

Walls and stairways and ceilings were black masses sweeping above their white brows. The hall inclined down, tipping them resistless to a small yellow room: the gas light burned. A door clamped them in on each other.

She saw on a bureau a tumbler holding two white roses. Back from her eyes to her red mind where the whole world lay cluttered away, the white roses swept. She forgot them, she felt them with the rest.

She stood against the enamelled bar of the bed, with hands holding her face.

. . . A street with sordid houses, rancid smell in a dim doorway, a reeling hall with doors shut . . rose in her mind, parted like rods the eyelids of her seeing: so that her eyes were gates now to a mind pried open by what she had seen. *This man*—there he was, who had brought her here!

City Block

. . . She sits in the Park. She saw herself as she sits very cool in the Park. Her severe straight blue cape falls to the hem of her dress: closely it clings to her nervous shoulders, demurely it flares at the base. She saw her snugly fitting small blue hat . . brimless, a bonnet . . the crisp white organdie bow, the long blue streamers behind.

. . . Sitting very cool in the usual Park upon a usual day, under a punctual sun. Merwin and Faith of the large brown eyes play near. . . *This man!* No, just policeman. A hard dead uniform, a heavy boot. . . *This man!* . . The roll of the green hill, the drifting of the air, the press of trees, the play of laughing children . . and herself crumpled, burning in the nearness of this man! . . . She walked through the Park, her knees were heavy and her legs were reed. She walked homeward driving Merwin and Faith who could not understand. "But it's not time, yet, Miss Desstyn. It's not *near* time for getting home!" Next day, her legs moved back upon the path. She was carried back to a bench that had become eternity since a night. Once again a dead dull uniform, thick boots, a magic from them! The Park rose sudden about her like a bowl so that she fell to the bottom.—*Man!*

In the little room where the white roses stand, she stands against the iron bed with this man! His hand on her trembling shoulder.

"Paula! Look at me! Won't you look at me, Paula?"

City Block

She stood stiff, let her hands fall from her face. Yet she could not see him. It was he. She stood hard against the bar of the iron bed to hold her trembling.

His hands took her hat. His arms were heavy about her. She trembled in arms infinitely heavy, her trembling was light. She was cold.

His hands became two instruments at work. Like a machine. And as they worked a punctuation machine-like marked their destructiveness: she knew . . his lips against her mouth. His hands, undressing her, took from her brutally, so sweetly! a gentleness that had been all her life and that now choked her to death.

She stood with blind eyes frozen as he worked, his breath upon her. She lay folded in his arms as he worked, still blind, still frozen. She stood again, she was naked.

"Paula!"

She opened her eyes now, saw him.

With a stillness born miraculously old, she lay down on the bed, the white roses in her eyes. He was away. She was very still and at ease. She lay as if she had always lain thus, naked.

He tried to understand her nakedness. This nameless splendor he has created before him! He could not understand, he could not see it. She was slim and cool and white: she lay relaxed with an arm cushioning her gold hair, with her hard breasts like early buds upon her; one leg bent upward, the white of the knee gleaming blue, the little foot flat

City Block

like a kiss upon the sheet. But it . . her nakedness . . he could not hold in his eyes. It was vast, it was a Sea. It had no surfaces like her and no color. It sucked him down. . .

He came up.

She was a woman lying in his arms . . he is a man! . . lying in his arms now sobbing. A woman and a man thrown to the strand of the world. Looking, thinking. They lay with loose arms. Thought could come in . . and the room.

—Roses placed there by someone: a bureau, a bed, a ceiling: a door to the flat of someone! . . a door bringing that flat to my nakedness, a ceiling on my nakedness! a strange scratched wooden chair holding what? disordered litter . . —*they are my clothes!*

She bent her arm, she bent her arm and her neck till the hurt eased her from the sight; she pressed her face within the nook of her elbow, she shook, she sobbed wildly.

He sat up. Against the salience of the room was a cloud for him. The bed and the room of Mrs Luve and the littered clothes—the chair and the floor were blades cutting the cloud. He saw his home, saw Alice his wife, his uniform, his Duty! He saw Paula.

There she was: he had just held her, he had her. Yet her nakedness brought him despair as if he watched her so within another's arms. So remote she was, so hopelessly remote: so helpless his love.

City Block

He could not bear this nearness of his love and her outside as if embraced by another.

He cried: "Paula!"

In the silence . . . a distant noise, only a stir: the flat and its cursed life. Behind it for her, the cool home where she worked, the gentle children that were the best she had, the distant gentle home across the sea whence she came: chaste, all, and nourishing before this man had burned it, burned it straw!

They groped for each other, lost in the impulse of self-preservation. They groped like two weak creatures in a storm who grope for a shelter. All now in the mind of each and in their eyes dragged them away from each other . . . their homes, their worlds, their creeds. He saw her nakedness poignantly sweet as if an invisible shield shielded it from him. He struggled to win back. She met his struggle with open tense arms. They won each other.

The storm of their passion cased them from the storm of the world again, till at last they stood up dressed.

Then they fled from each other.

Patrick Broaddus rose from the table at which he ate his breakfast. His body showed flexible and sensitive within the thick shirt. His wife Alice was ready to be kissed: he kissed her. The

City Block

two boys came running, he lifted them up, said Good-bye. There above his dark blue coat which she held up for him, his wife's worn face smiling, her red hands helping him on. He buttoned his dark blue coat . . he was massive and ponderous now: he noted how Alice had resewn the button that was loose: he went to report for duty.

He did not understand . . there was the sun as usual burning the top window of the bottle-works . . how he could do these things and how these things could be. He tried to look at Patrolman Patrick Broaddus. He did not fail to find him. He was amazed at not failing.

Twenty-nine years old he was and in good health. A good home, a good job, a good record in it. Now a truth, dimly athrob with the sound *Paula*, running athwart the morning, athwart his work, scarring the face of his wife, branding his boys, shrivelling up his home: a truth which as he touched upon it was a corpse. So pale, so pale his touching it. More dead than a live thing dead: it was dead, this truth, like a thing that had never been.

He worked on his beat. His shoes trod firm pavement: words came firm from his mouth: firm forms of men and women and of wagons channeled as ever under his firm right hand. This truth was a dead thing that had never been . . yet a lovely truth named Paula. A woman crossed. She lifted her skirt: she bent slightly, the clinging silk of her white waist creased at the bulge of her breast. A dead truth that had never been . . he wondered

City Block

. . stirred. It stirred in himself. He beat away from it: it drew him. He denied it: it stood ready, should he deny it, to consume him. The world was a placid plain with a calm stream making it cool. Now it wrenched up into heights, it plunged down in torrents. If he denied, he was crushed!

.

Always Paula Desstyn jumped crisp from bed the moment she awoke.

She was brightest and crisp in the morning. She lay very still in bed upon her back, her gold hair tumbled about the pillow, her hands limp and warm upon the coverlet. Her eyes opened, she jumped up, she shut the window. She took in the day through her eyes and her bare throat. She went back to the middle of the room. She pulled off her gown, she looked at her naked body. Her hand ran wistfully upon her body as if she sought her body. Her eyes looked away as if her hand had not found.

She bathed. She wove her hair into two tight braids . . very tight . . till the scalp pulled and hurt. She coiled the braids like ropes upon her head. She saw her face. It was not changed. . . Her hair was tortured but her face was the same face! She had blue eyes. She had still her fine straight nose above the wistful lips. . . She unbound her hair and let it fall to her shoulders. With a wide comb she combed it to a twinkling wave. Then as usual she made it parted at her

City Block

brow, low to her neck so that its golden nimbus was a song to the sharp word of her face. She went into the other room. The sun stood upon the sleeping faces of Merwin and Faith. She stood there silent. The faces opened. Children's laughter mingled with the sun.

Paula went through the usual big house: spoke with her mistress, ate, cared for the children. Paula slept. . .

She felt her body clean, her lips were not crushed. She felt no burden upon her body. She asked herself no question. She was a shell washed white by a Sea, washed empty. Faint was the murmur in her. High was her rejoicing that she was empty, thinking that she would always now be empty.

Paula was English and poor. She had pride. She had intelligence. In America she had no friends. She did not like having to care for the children of the rich. But she had created a fine professional pride in her work: she was conscientious: she was but rarely bitter. She held with ease the respect of her mistress, the love of Merwin and Faith. Within these reservations of her sense of the injustice of her place in the world, she had joy of her place and she had faith in her world. For Paula loved children. Merwin was a sturdy boy honest with the honesty of a colt: Faith was a child bedewed in loveliness like a new flower in high wet grasses. She loved them. She knew that they meant much to her . . . the restrained love they gave her. And now, in this hushed emptiness

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within her, this washed white emptiness that was she thought herself, work came more easily, more gratefully than ever it had come to Paula.

The children were lovelier and nearer. Their need and their separateness were nearer, so that she went to them more clear. She was warmer, more loving, taking care of them. Ways to instruct and please and help them came profusely to her mind like inspirations. Her mind was running without let toward the need and the presence of children. Only vaguely, at rare times, like the hush in a shell, the unbelievable word: "*I have lain with a man!*"

Merwin went about with luminous hard eyes striking and prancing the world like a colt's hoofs. Faith flung little eager arms about her: "O Miss Desstyn, how I love you . . . I love you . . . I love you more than Mama!" Her mind was all open to them; something more than mind; something open where tears were. Her eyes filled. She clasped the little girl. She pressed the girl's lips playfully together with her fingers, kissed them.

"Run," she said. "Tidy the table, dear. Haven't we decided we're going to keep our room together?"

. . . For days so, she laughing and crisp and brightly murmurous in the large house with her two children. . . Came the day she had not looked for.—*Here it is!* Today, he expects me, he waits for me today!

She was a crumpled creature dragged by a long

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leash. She went: she had to go: she was dragged hurtfully upon the bottom of her world away from her world. She looked up once again, against the eyes of this man. . .

Late afternoon and sunless in the room. Out of their separate lives, they stand against each other. Rebellion made her dry and unloving. A hot wind was this man and she stands white against him.

She was tense, he was limp. They stood together against this room that they hated.

"Paula," broke from him, his hands waved up. "We cannot help it."

"We can!"

There was space between them and their flesh had not touched. A Terror rose, so gradual and so vast like a slow dying of the sun, they gave no heed to it. It did its work upon them, they made response like atoms blindly moving.

Paula stood with her flung word come back to her, barbed on her. She had a will. Now she let her will move to swing all of her away—away from this man standing beyond her, away from this room with its glower and its secret. Her will worked. Then the Terror! She is away from him. She is away from air to breathe. She is away from ground to stand. She is pain, gasping, falling. He is away from her.

He had no will: he had memories and habits. He had duty and home. He let them swing him. So the Terror on him too!

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Their mouths were open seeking breath, their arms were wide seeking hold. Blinded arms catch arms, a stern mouth sucks mouth. They held, they breathed each other.

She moaned. She beat her head against his breast. . . "Paula! Paula!" . . . His fingers ran through her hair, trampled her eyes, her mouth, clutched her throat. But they needed no help. Ground and air, this. At last they were warm and still, deeply breathing.

Nakedness binds this warmth and this stillness. Nakedness must end.

Within their clothes, together, they were clad once more in agony. Clothes caught them back into the separate worlds where they had ever dwelt, where they had ever to return. Since nakedness must end.

4

Mrs Luve left the door ajar and waited.

At last the front door opened. Light scared steps down the hall. Mrs Luve stood at the door.

"Won't you come in a moment? Please! I want to talk to you."

She saw a young woman stark with outrage before her. A young woman very sweet, with her outraged blue eyes and her fists.

"You think I had no right to speak to you? You think I had no right to look at your face. No—stop. I *have* spoken to you now, I *have* seen your

City Block

face. That damage is done. I think I had a good reason. Wouldn't it be foolish, now the price is paid, not to get the reason?"

Paula's fists opened and shut. She bent her head stiffly. She came in.

Mrs Luvé shut the door. She did not ask her to sit. They were both standing.

"Have you ever seen a woman like me before?" She had not meant to say this. "Look at me."

"What do you want?"

The older woman knew that this within her was real. She had not gauged it. She did not worry or press. She knew it would come out.

"You and Broaddus love each other," she began. "I want you to look at me. I want you to understand, do you see? . . . that I—I more than most folks—have the right to speak to you, girl."

There was a pause. The girl sought for her contempt and her repulsion to wrap about her. She did not find them.

"I know what love is, because I know what horror comes, when love is starved or denied. I—I am a woman who has lived in dirt. Do you understand? I know about that. I know that dirt is always just that denying of love. Why do you . . . you two do what you are doing?"

Paula turned and looked at the door.

"You love each other, I know. I knew that from Patrick Broaddus' eyes when he first came here. I know it now better than ever, seeing you. For God's sake, girl! why can't you be decent?"

City Block

Paula was torn. —What is this woman . . of all women, she . . saying to me? Shaming her!

“What right——”

“No right, girl. I just—I just can’t help it. I know what you’re going to say. He’s married. He’s on the Force. What of it? Don’t—don’t try to make love live in a nasty hidden hallroom . . it won’t. It will suffocate. It will begin to stink.”

Paula opened the door. Firm steps now in the hall. They were somehow in the room, all three now, together.

The man’s breath rose in storm. He was white.

“What does this mean, Luve?”

“I am giving notice you can’t have the room, after this week.”

“To whom are you giving notice? What right did you have——?”

The woman came to the man’s side and with two suppliant hands clasped his.

“For God’s sake, Pat,” she said. “I’m fond of you. I have been suffering about this. You listen to me. To her, I’m nothing but a whore. But I see things, I feel things. You said you trusted me, big Boy that you are. I have been laying awake nights, thinking and suffering about you two. I have been living so near to the pain and beauty, and the wrong of this. I couldn’t help it, Pat, I had to speak. Why—I never laid eyes on this child here, and yet I knew what she looked like. When I saw her for the first time today, I recognized her—I did. I would have, anywhere.

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For God's sake, *take* her. Take her decent. She's lovely, man. How dare you hide her in a hole-and-corner? Take her out to the sun, where the two of you belong!"

Mrs Luve stopped. She was very pale and humble. She looked at her own hands, she clasped them. Pride and coolness came back. She flung wide her hands:

"At any rate, the last week's up tomorrow . . the room, you can't have it again."

She did not look at them more. She seemed angry though herself knew not why. She looked straight before her with her head slightly to one side.

Then she looked back, there was wild fear in her eyes.

"Excuse me, girl, for having spoken to you. You needn't worry. I am no teller of secrets. I shall never recognize you, if we should pass in the street."

.

They were in their room, with silence.

They looked at each other: they were able, strangely, to look at one another, clothed still each in their world.

Filaments came out from themselves, frail, diaphanous, parabolic . . upon each other's vision. He saw her sweet and tender. He let himself float with this filament of longing to where she was now, where he saw her, gently his own beside him. He

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saw life with her, her in his life: they close together and quiet moulding life, making life's form of themselves. It seemed easeful, it seemed needful. It seemed sure like a day dawning.

She with bright eyes felt his new eyes upon her: within her breast that had been hard and cold a warm stream opened. Her fingers tingled. She needed to lean back, she was full of sleep. She did not see him now, but each pore of her body took him in, he was formed within her. She saw him so, as he was: a tender hopeful boy, so clumsily lost within a world of Duty, within a world of fatherhood and manhood. He needed a world of his own . . . her own . . . a world she alone could make for him. And the sedateness of his home, the sedateness of his work were teeth cutting his boyish flesh.

They came closer. For the first time, she placed her hand in his and he held it gently. For the first time they smiled at each other in peace. They sat together on the bed, and he held her hand like a boy. She let her cheek come to his: her cheek touched his, her hair twinkled against his ear and against his eyes. So they sat, looking beyond themselves, faintly asway in themselves . . . tenderly, spent . . . like two children at nightfall.

At last they got up. He saw the hand he was holding. He kissed it. He had never kissed her hand. She pulled him down to her and kissed his hair. They got up as out of a Sleep so magical

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and great that it spread now still above their waking heads, under their walking feet.

They got up, and they walked with waking eyes away, into their separate worlds.

They did not meet again.

FIVE

UNDER THE DOME: ALEPH

THEY were two figures under the grey of the dome . . two straight faint figures of black: they were a man and woman with heads bowed, straight . . under the surge of the Dome.

1

Friday night when always he broke away in order to pray in the *Schul*, and when she sat in the shop and had to speak with the customers who came, these praying hours of Friday night. Shabbas morning at least he did not go also. —My heart tells me it is wrong. Lord, forgive me for Esther and for my little girl. Lord, you know it is for them I do not go to *Schul* on Shabbas morning. . . But by God, you will keep the store those two hours Friday? Do you hear? By God, what else have I ever asked you for? Don't you sit around and do nothing all the day, and aren't Flora's clothes a filth: and hardly if you'll cook our meals. But this you will do: this you will do! Friday night. Lord, why is there no light in Esther? What have I done, Lord? what have I not done?

She sat in a chair, always, near the side wall: her eyes lay burning against the cold glare of the gas.

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Above her shoulder on the wall, was a large sheet of fashions. Women with wasp waists, smirking, rolling; stiff men, all clothes, with little heads. Under the table, where Meyer sits with his big feet so much to look at, Flora played, a soiled bundle, with a ball of yarn and a huge gleaming *scissors*.—No one perhaps comes, and then I do not mind sitting and keeping the store. I saw a dead horse in the street. —A dead horse, two days dead, rotting and stiff. Against the grey of the living street, a livid dead horse. A hot stink was his cold death against the street's cleanness. There are two little boys, wrapped in blue coat, blue muffler, leather cap. They stand above the gaunt head of the horse and sneer at him. His flank rises red and huge. His legs are four strokes away from life. He is dead. . . The naughty boys pick up bricks. They stand, very close, above the head of the horse. They hurl down a brick. It strikes the horse's skull, falls sharp away. They hurl down a brick. It cuts the swollen nostril, falls soft away. The horse does not mind, the horse does not hurt. He is dead.

Go away, you two! Throwing stones at a dead horse! Go away, I say! How would you like——. When one is dead, stones strike one's skull and fall sharp away, one is *moveless*. When one is dead, stones strike the soft of one's throat and fall soft away, one is *hurtless*. When one is dead one does not hurt.

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She sat and turned her eyes away from her child. Flora had smear on her face: her hands were grimed with the floor. One of her stockings was down: her little white knee was going to scrape on the floor, be black before it was bloody. So. . . A long shining table under a cold gas spurt. A store with clothes and a stove, and no place for herself. A row of suits, all pressed and stiff with Meyer's diligence. A pile of suits, writhed with the wear of men, soiled, crumpled with traffic of streets, with bending of body in toil, in eating, in loving perhaps. Grimed living suits. Meyer takes an iron and it steams and it presses hard, it sucks up the grime. It sucks out the life from the suit. The suit is stiff and dead, now, ready to go once more over the body of a man and suck to itself his life.

The automatic bell clangs. There in the open door was a dark tall woman:—customer.

Esther stood too. She felt she was shorter and less tidy:—more beautiful though.

Two women across the tailor-shop, seeing each other.

"I came for my husband's—for Mr Breddan's dress-suit. Mr Lanich told him it would be ready at seven?"

Esther Lanich moved, Sophie Breddan stood. Between slow dark curve, swift dark stroke of these two women, under a tailor's table the burn of a dirty child, mumbling intent with scissors between her soiled frail legs, at play with loose hair.

City Block

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—She has a child, and she lets her play dirty with scissors under a tailor table. "How much is it?" . . . After a decent bedtime.

—Does she think I care about this? "Oh, no hurry. Better come in and pay my—Mr Lanich. Any time."

The clang of the bell.

Esther is seated. Her gray almond-tilted eyes seem sudden to stand out upon the farther wall of her husband's shop, and to look upon her. Her eyes speak soft warm words that touch her hair, touch her lips, lie like caressing fingers upon the soft cloth that lies upon her breast.

—Less beautiful than I, though. My flesh is soft and sweet, it is the color of cream. What for? My hair is like an autumn tree gleaming with sun. I can let it fall through the high channel of my breast against my stomach that does not bulge but

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lies soft and low like a cushion of silk. What for? My eyes see beauty. What for? O there is no God. If there is a God, what for? He will come back and work. He will eat and work. He is kind and good. What for? When he is excited with love, doesn't he make an ugly noise with his nose? What else does he make with his love? . . . Another like Flora? God forbid. What for?

She did not pull down the wide yellow shade, though it was night. The street was a ribbon of velvet blackness laid beside the hurting and sharp brightness of the store. The yellow light was hard like grains of sand under the quick of her nails. She was afraid of the street. She was hurt in the store. But the brightness clamped her. She did not move. —O let no more customers come! "Keep quiet, Flora." I cannot move. She was clamped.

But the store moved, moved.

There was a black Wheel with a gleaming axle—the Sun—that sent light dimming down its spokes as it spun. From the rim of the Wheel where it was black, bright dust flung away as it spun. The store was a speck of bright dust. It flung straight. It moved along the velvet path of the street, touching, not merging with its night. It moved, it moved, she sat still in its moving. The store caught up with Meyer. He entered the store. He was there. He was there, scooped up from the path of the street by the store. Now her work was over. He was there. The store was a still

City Block

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A man with blond hair, flat feet that shuffled, small tender hands. A man with a mouth gentle and slow, with eyes timid to see: "Come dear: that is no place." —Why she lets the child play with my shears!

Tender hands pull Flora from beneath the table. Flora comes blinking, unprotesting. Where her father's hands leave off from her, she stays. She sinks back to the floor. She looks at her little fists from which the scissors are gone. She misses hard gleaming steel. She opens and shuts her fists and looks at them: she cries. But she does not move. . . Her mother does not move. . . Her father does not move. He squats on the table. His head sways with his thoughts. He knows that Flora will stop crying . . . what can he do? . . . in perhaps half an hour. It is a weak cry. Grows weaker. He is used to it. There is work.

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2

In the door and the clang again of the bell, a boy with them. A boy they knew—son of their neighbors—big for his years and heavy, with fat lips, eyes clouded, hair black and low over his clouded eyes. Esther alone saw, as he lurched in, one foot dragging always slightly.

He went for little Flora with no greeting for them: familiarly as he knew he would find her, had come so, often. —He loves her, the man who squats on the table and sews smiles on the boy who loves and plays with his child.

"Hello, kid," voice of a thick throat, "look—what I got for you here."

Flora lets the chair of her late love lurch against her back, strike her forward. She does not care. She watches two hands—grey-caked over red—unwrap from paper a dazzle of colors, place it to her eyes on the floor, pull with a string: it has little wheels, it moves!

"Quackle-duck," he announces.

Flora spreads out her hands, sinks on her rump, feels its green head that bobs with purple bill, feels its yellow tail.

"Quackle-duck—yours," says the boy.

She takes the string from his hand. With shoulder and stomach she swings her arm backward and pulls. The duck spurts, bobbing its green long head against her leg.

She plays. The boy on his knees with soiled

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thick drawers showing between his stockings and his pants plays with her. . .

Meyer Lanich did not cease from work, nor his woman from silence. His face was warm in pleasure, watching his child who had a toy and a play-mate. —I am all warm and full of love for Herbert Rabinowich: perhaps some day I can show him, or do something for his father? Now there was no way but to go on working and smile so the pins in his mouth did not prick.

The eyes of Esther drew a line from these two children back to the birth of the one that is hers. She dwelt in a world about the bright small room like the night: in a world that roared and wailed, that reeled with despair of her hope.

She had borne this dirty child all clean beneath her heart. Her belly was sweet and white, it had borne her: her breasts were high and proud, they had emptied, they had come to sag for this dirty child on the floor: face and red lips on a floor that any shoes might step.

Had she not borne a Glory through the world, bearing this stir of perfect flesh? Had she not borne a Song through the harsh City? Had she not borne another mite of pain, another fleck of dirt upon the City's shame-heaps?

She lies in her bed burned in sweet pain. Pain wrings her body, wrings her soul like the word of the Lord within lips of Deborah. Her bed with white sheets, her bed with its pool of blood is an altar where she lays forth her Glory which she has

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walking carried like Song through the harsh city.
—What have I mothered but dirt? . . .

A transfigured world she knows she will soon see. Yes: it is a flat of little light—and the bugs seep in from the other flats no matter how one cleans—it is a man of small grace, it is a life of few windows. But her child will be borne to smite life open wide. Her child shall leap above its father and its mother as the sun above forlorn fields. . . She arose from her bed. She held her child in her arms. She walked through the reeling Block with feet aflame. She entered the shop. . . There—squatting with feet so wide to see—her man: his needle pressed by the selfsame finger. The world was not changed for her child. Behold her child changing—let her sit forever upon her seat of tears—let her lay like fire to her breast this endless vision of her child changing unto the world. . .

—I have no voice, I have no eyes. I am a
woman who has lain with the world.
The world's voice upon my lips gave my
mouth gladness.
The world's arm about my flanks gave my
flesh glory.
I was big with gladness and glory.
Joyful I lost in love of my vision my eyes,
in-love of my song my voice.
I have borne another misery into the
world. . .

City Block

Meyer Lanich moves, putting away the trowsers he has patched. —O Lord, why must I sew so many hours in order to reap my pain? Why must I work so long, heap the hard wither of so many hours upon my child who cannot sleep till I do, in order that all of us may be unhappy?

The clang and the door open. The mother of the boy.

"Oh, here you are! Excuse me, friends. I was worrying over Herbert. . . Well, how goes it?"

She smiled and stepped into the room: saw them all.

"All well, Mrs Rabinowich," said Meyer. "We are so glad when your Herbert comes to play with Florchen."

Mrs Rabinowich turns the love of her face upon the children who do not attend her. A grey long face, bitterly pock-marked, in a glow of love.

"Look what your Herbert brought her," Meyer sews and smiles. "A toy. He shouldn't, now. Such a thing costs money."

Mrs Rabinowich puts an anxious finger to her lips.

"Don't," she whispers. "If he wants to, he should. It is lovely that he wants to. There's money enough for such lovely wants. . . Well, Darling. Won't you come home to bed?"

Herbert does not attend.

His mother sighed: a sigh of great appeasement

City Block

and of content. —This is my son! She turned to where Esther sat with brooding eyes. Her face was serious now, grey ever, warm with a grey sorrow. Her lips moved: they knew not what to say.

"How are you, Esther?"

"Oh, I am well, Mrs Rabinowich. Thank you." A voice resonant and deep, a voice mellowed by long keeping in the breast of a woman.

"Why don't you come round, sometime, Esther? You know, I should always be so glad to see you."

"Thank you, Mrs Rabinowich."

"You know . . we're just next door," the older woman smiled. "You got time, I think. More time, than I."

"Oh, she got time all right!" The sharp words flash from the soft mouth of Meyer, who sews and seems in no way one with the sharp words of his mouth. Esther does not look. She takes the words as if like stones they had fallen in her lap. She smiles away. She is still. And Lotte Rabinowich is still, looking at her with a deep wonder, shaking her head, unappeased in her search.

She turns at last to her boy: relieved.

"Come Herbert, now. Now we really *got* to go."

She takes his hand that he lets limply rise. She pulls him gently.

"Goodnight, dear ones. . . Do come, sometimes, Esther—yes?"

"Thank you, Mrs Rabinowich."

Meyer says: "Let the boy come when he wants. We love to have him."

City Block

His mother smiles. —Of course: who would not love to have him? Good heart, fine boy. "It's long past bedtime. Naughty!" She kisses him.

Herbert, a little like a horse, swings away his heavy head.

They are gone in the bell's jangle.

"What a good boy: what a big-hearted boy," Meyer said aloud. "I like that boy. He will be strong and a success. You see."

Her words "I saw him lift the skirt of Flora and peep up" she could not utter. She was silent, seeing the dull boy with the dirty mind, and his mother and Meyer through love thinking him good. What she saw in her silence hurt her.

Her hurt flowed out in fear. She saw her child: a great fear came on Esther. —Flora is small and white, the world is full of men with thick lips, hairy hands, of men who will lift her skirt and kiss her, of men who will press their hairiness against her whiteness.

—There is a Magic, Love, whereby this shame is sweet. Where is it? A world of men with hair and lips against her whiteness. Where is the magic against them? Esther was very afraid. She hated her daughter.

8

Meyer Lanich came down from his table and drew down the wide yellow shade and shut out the night. No more stray customers to enter. He

City Block

turned the key of the door. He had his back to the door, seeing his work and seeing his child who now sat vacant upon the floor and grimed her eyes with her fists too sleepy to hunt play . . . seeing his wife. He sought to see this woman who was his wife. To this end came his words, old words, old words he had tried often, often failed with, words that would come again since they were the words of his seeking to find the woman his wife.

"Esther," he said, "it is nine o'clock and I have much work to do—a couple of hours of work. . . ." —I could work faster alone, it will be midnight so with this pain forever in my eyes. "Esther won't you go home and put Florchen to bed?"

She looked at him with her full lovely eyes. Why since he saw them lovely could he not see them loving? He had said these words before, so often before. She looked at him.

"Esther," he said, "it is bad for a baby of four to be up so late. It is bad for her to sit around on the floor under the gas—smelling the gas and the gasoline and the steam of the clothes. Can't you consider Flora?"

"I am afraid."

"What is there to be afraid? Can't you see? Why aren't you afraid of what will happen to Flora? . . . Eh—that don't frighten you, does it? She's a baby. If my Mother could see. . . ."

"Meyer, I can't. Meyer, I can't. You know that I can't."

City Block

He waved his hands. She was stiff. They came no nearer one to the other. About them each, two poles, swirled thoughts and feelings: a world that did not touch the other.

He clambered back to his work. The room was hot. The gas light burred. Against his temples it beat harsh air, harsh light, the acrid smells of his work—against her temples.

Esther sat. The words of her man seeking the woman she was had not found for him but had stirred her. Her breast moved fast, but all else of her was stiff. Stiff, all she moved like a thick river drawn against its flow, drawn mounting to its head. —I can not go home alone, through the empty hall alone, into the black rooms alone. Against their black the flicker of a match that may go out, the dare of a gaslight that is all white and shrieking with its fear of the black world it is in. She could not go home alone. —For, Esther, in your loneliness you will find your life. I am afraid of my life.

She was caught, she was trapped. —I am miserable. Let me only not move. . . Since to move was to break against walls of a trap. Here in the heart of movelessness a little space. Let her not stir where the walls and the roof of the black small trap will smite her!

4

The room moves up the dimension of time. Hour and hour and hour! Bearing its freight toward sleep. Thick hot room, torn by the burr of two

City Block

lights, choked by the strain of two bound souls,
moving along the night. Writhing in dream. Sing-
ing. . .

—My flesh sings for silk and rich jewels;
My flesh cries for the mouth of a king.
My hair, why is it not a canopy of love,
Why does it not cover sweet secrets of love?
My hair cries to be laid upon white linen.
I have brought misery into the world. . .
I have lived with a small man and my dream
has shrunk him,
Who in my dream enlarged the glory of
princes.
He looks upon me with soft eyes, and my
flesh is hard against them.
He beats upon me with warm heart, and my
breasts do not rise up for him.
They are soft and forgetful of his beating
heart.
My breasts dream far when he is near to
them. . . They droop, they die.
His hands are a tearful prayer upon my
body. . .
I sit: there is no way between my man and
my dream,
There is no way between my life and life,
There is no way between my love and my
child.
I lie: and my eyes are shut. I sleep: and
they open.

City Block

A world of mountains
Plunges against my sleep. . .

—Lord, Lord: this is my daughter before me, her cheeks that have not bloomed are wilting. Preserve her, Lord. This is my wife before me, her love that has not lived is dead. . . Time is a barren field that has no end. I see no horizon. My feet walk endlessly, I see no horizon. . . I am faithful, Lord. . .

.

The tailor-shop is black. It has moved up three hours into midnight. It is black.

Esther and Meyer walk the grey street. In the arms of the man sleeps Flora. His arm aches. He dares not change her to his other arm. Lest she wake.

He has undressed her. Gentle hands of a man. He holds her little body, naked, near his eyes. Her face and her hands, her feet and her knees are soiled. The rest of her body is white—very white—no bloom upon her body. He kisses her black hair.

He lays her away beneath her coverlet.

There is his wife before him. She is straight. Her naked body rises, column of white flame, from her dun skirt. Esther—his love—she is in a case of fire. Within her breasts as within hard jewels move the liquids of love. Within her body, as within a case, lies her soul, pent, which should pour warmth upon them.

City Block

He embraces her.

"Esther . . . Esther. . ." He can say no more.

His lips are at her throat. Can he not break her open?

She sways back, yielding. Her eyes swerve up. They catch the cradle of her child.

—Another child . . another agony of glory . . another misery to the world?

She is stiff in the unbroken case of a vast wound all about her.

So they lie down in bed. So they sleep.

She has cooked their breakfast.

They walk, a man and a woman, down the steep street to work. A child between them, holding the hand of a man.

They are grey, they are sullen. They are caught up in the sullen strife of their relentless way. There is no let to them. Time is a barren field with no horizon.

SIX

UNDER THE DOME: TAU

THERE was a light shining within the lives of Lotte and Isidor Rabinowich.

1

She stood behind the counter of their store and watched her husband place on the opposite shelf tin toys . . engines, clowns, sailboats, penny-bank . . that had just come. She had arranged the syrup bottles on the fountain. She saw him, very little man: she knew behind his short sparse beard of black and grey his chin which she had never seen and which was round like a child's: she knew under the skull-cap a bland forehead, lodged there sweetness and trust in her. An ineffectual man whom she had always mothered.

"Lotte, where will I put these?"

"Why, over there."—Yes all this, ". . with the other games." —All this. A child of a man, my Man, who has not gotten along. With a temper that flares at times. Not often. Shallow flame trying to burn away in its moment of life the commanding—the real—I have had to be. All this, all this yes. But father of my child.

She smiled at him: her palms were upward over her hips, they glowed there strong against the grey pity of her pockmarked face. . . —Such a child. Father of him. . .

City Block

He turned his colorless eyes—he had felt her—upon her. They glistened under her exultation like waters suntouched.

“What is it?” he smiled back, holding awkward a huge cardboard box.

“Come here.”

He leaned over the counter. She kissed his lips . . . —too soft. He shivered a little, smiling.

“There now,” she sobered him. “Better take in the pennies, Isidor, from the newsstand. You know, some of the boys, when they pass by from school—” She pondered. . . —They’re not *all* honest, no.

He obeyed her. “The first letter of the sign is off.” He poured her the pennies.

“I saw Schmalzer,” she nodded.

He took his place at her side behind the counter. Boys and girls will be coming from school . . . candy, pencil, soda, icecream sandwich . . . the first warm day with the sun of Spring beating into the crevice of the Block. In a few minutes now, both of us are going to be busy.

They stood silent, thinking: of one height they were: waiting.

.

From the West came the Sun in shouting strokes, pried open the cold walls of the Block. The Block grew warm, it opened wide its tremulous walls to receive the Sun. . . . Now a flood within its walls. Children pouring from school, bubble and pelt and foam of children within the Block. They sparkled,

City Block

they leaped, they clustered. They were a tide under the open walls, flood of the Sun's long strokes within the walls of the Block. . .

. . . And the small brown shop, all shadow, the little woman and man standing within the shop, within the swelling walls of the passionate street, within the flood of the Sun. . .

Door burst open. Boys and girls with voices like shrill flowers, like golden pebbles pelting: boys and girls with wishes—little flags—upon their heads and the wind of the Sun's strokes making them whip and snap.

Lotte and Isidor worked. Counted candies . . six of them for a penny . . two cent or three cent soda? . . . Here are your jacks . . we haven't strawberry only vanilla and chocolate . . what did you give me, five cents? . . . *you* scratched that ruler.

Lotte worked in a smile. . . —These are children. All they will not grow into men and women. The Lord chooses. Pity the mothers whose sons He has not chosen to grow into strong men. . . Her lips moved faster than fingers. Lotte worked with her eyes. She found him, big and dark, so strong!—outstanding so among children.

—He is my son my Dream is bone of his body.

He is my hope my hope runs red in his veins.

He is my son and my Dream behold he is real!

City Block

. . . Far from the Sun, in the thick clot of store,
came a radiance on the wings of children, and made
in her eyes a countering gleam against the laugh-
ter of children.

—Children, children and *my* child. I know that
I am chosen in *my* child. He is big and clumsy,
he has not quick laughter like that boy: no ready
words. He is slow—he is deep. There is a glory
hidden in his eyes. He cannot blossom so soon
like you. . . five cents of these? . . . whose mother
has not been chosen. Let her be glad now! . . .
They loved the Rabinowich store. They paid their
pennies and stayed. They romped and quarreled,
they cluttered the cramped space before the coun-
ter. They made this shadowed spot of the long
street wall burst with bright green.

Herbert among them, standing among and be-
yond them. . . —Strange boy, what would become
of Herbert with a less wise mother? There is
Cause, it was written that I should be his mother.
Often he is naughty. . . “Share your licorice, son.”
. . . He changes, he shifts. He is deep.

—O you who work beside me and who are
weak,

Whose weakness I share and shall share
always,

Behold we have brought forth strength!

—Our path is darkness we must walk it
Our bed is darkness there must we lie.

City Block

Shadow is the world.
Behold we have brought forth light!

. . . The small store big with the song of children. The brown floor spread and adance with children's feet. . . The voices of children rose above a silence, wondrously, like young trees of a young Spring.

—My flesh is yours whom I could never love,
Behold it has brought forth Love!

2

The children are gone.

They are in the store, the three, together, alone.

"Now, Herbert, son . . why don't you go quick and do your homework? Then you'll have all the rest of the time to play. Come."

"No homework, Mama."

"Of course there's homework. You always have homework. Don't you want to——"

"No homework, I tell you. Give me another licorish stick. No homework."

"Why—are you sure? That's funny. No homework? Why no homework, Herbert?"

"Give me a licorish stick, I tell you. No homework—no homework."

"You gave all the other away—I saw you. Darling! Here. Don't black your whole face."

City Block

A cloud cuts the Sun. A shadow is a dark shaft striking down upon the Block, the store. It cleaves the heart of Lotte as the cloud cleaves the Sun. Her heart is opened.

“What is this afternoon??” say her lips.

Her man turned to her. “It is Friday.”

She smiles at his not-knowing. Yet what does she know who smiles at his not-knowing?

She holds her lips. . .

—There is in this afternoon a sun and a cloud.
They have met like man and woman.
There is in this afternoon a cleaving and
a searing. There is in this afternoon a
Life and it comes!

The dark shaft cleaves her heart into two lips.
They speak. . .

—I am with my man who is an old man and
whom I should not have wed. He is the
father of my son: always I think of this
that I may not think too sore how I have
married the man whom I should not have
wed.

My hair is black, I am not so old as my
neighbors feel me. No color can break
the grey web of my cheeks, I wear black
clothes. For my man is old, it is good to
wear black beside him. This is no true
reason. I wear black clothes and I feel

City Block

old because of my man. But there is true reason why he is my man: this also is the reason why I wear black clothes.

Black is the color of rejoicing unto them who are chosen of God. I have tasted God, all other foods are poison. I have seen the Lord, all other fires are black.

Beneath my black dress, mark-meshed skin: beneath grey skin is my body of white.

Within my flesh was a son, his taste is my flesh. I am a small woman given, after I was marked forever by disease, to him who would have me. I have been good to him, he has blessed me. It is by his seed that the Lord chose me.

—Blessed be the long low years we have toiled bent.

Blessed be their desert: for they hold a Jewell

It flames beyond Grey, it is a roar of glory above silence.

—He plays on the floor in air soiled brown: he shines.

He is strange, he is generous and slow. He says nothing. Often his words tell nothing to my mind. He is not good in school. He was left back in school. Through him I am chosen of God.

City Block

God loves him above all us. Above bright
children, gay children.

This son of my sad flesh is the son of Spirit.
He is many strengths, he is many souls.
He is old not to know how to take care
of wiping his nose, how to keep from dirty-
tying his pants. Grace and Light he
is. . .

—What is this afternoon? what is this Life
that comes?

The shadow of the Lord—the Hand of the
Lord

Makes shadow of our lives.

Why should I yearn beyond the Hand of
the Lord?

.

The door opened. —Customer? . . . Herbert
knows her. His teacher!

“This . . Mr and Mrs Rabinowich? Good day.
I am Miss Klaar. I am Herbert’s teacher.”

A tall thin woman, gold hair waving away from
a prim hat, bright girl cheeks, a resolute chin came
into the soiled brown store. She stood stiff and
high, propped faintly against these two little lives
who looked at her in passiveness, waiting her word.
She picked the mother. Coming closer:

“May I speak to one of you?” she said.

Herbert pawed her hand, pounded his head

City Block

against her waist: her white hands were uneasy fending him off.

She placed his blackness aside. Lotte led her into a back room silent. There was no word:—she is Herbert's teacher. . . . There is in this afternoon a Life and it comes! . . . The door closed, she Herbert's teacher had the sense of the little man and of the boy behind her, living, filling a world of their own, not her world: what did she know of these worlds whose sons like shoots of an alien earth sat under her desk, drank her words?

This mother:—this is hard work!

Lotte brought her a chair, close where she stood. Lotte stood, in a bedroom. Miss Klaar felt a low specked ceiling, an iron bed so clean, scrubbed floor, a window grated pouring grey dim against a glow in the room that had no kinship with the harsh red paint of the bureau. It was about her, this world she invaded—she and grey dim through a grated window—upon authority that seemed profane to her. —I feel like a heathen. . . . She plunged, not letting the glow of this meek strong creature in black impinge too deep on what she knew was her duty.

"Mrs Rabinowich, I came to speak to you about your son."

"Thank you, Miss Klaar."

"Won't you sit down, too?"

Lotte sat on the bed's edge . . . there was no other chair . . . with a stern grace.

"How do you find your son, Mrs Rabinowich?"

City Block

"Why—I do not find him. I—what do you mean, Miss Klaar?"

"He is a good-hearted boy. We all love him in his Class. But he does reprehensible things. I feel I must tell you."

"He is not good in his lessons?"

"Worse than that. He is unruly. He does not obey the simplest order. . . He has been dirty, Mrs Rabinowich——"

'There was silence.

"He does not seem quite to understand what—what one might expect a boy of twelve, with a good upbringing—" she stopped. "—I know, seeing you—that his upbringing must be good——"

"No, no . . . I am not—very—Miss Klaar—very intelligent."

"You know he was left back, last year. . . I am fond of Herbert. . . But I feel, Mrs Rabinowich . . . I should long ago have reported him to the Board. . ."

"Tell me. . . What have I done wrong?"

"Nothing, I am sure, Mrs Rabinowich."

"Why report him? What is there to tell? Tell me. . ."

". . . It is the rule, that when a child does not seem to fit in the regular graded Class, Mrs Rabinowich . . . that the Authorities should examine him, in order to find out where he does fit."

"Where does he fit? . . Lower down?"

"No, I don't think so. . . Not just a lower grade."

Lotte feared: "I do not understand, Miss Klaar."

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City Block

"Of course! Now all this will be managed by someone who does. I have made an appointment for you, Mrs Rabinowich." She took a card from her purse, she was smiling under her prim seriousness:—it is over! "Here, you must report here, at five. This afternoon. Dr Finney. I do not know Dr Finney, but he I am sure will help you—will tell us more about—about what is the matter with Herbert. If anything. . ."

She was up. Lotte held the card in trembling fingers.

"Do not forget: this afternoon at five. This afternoon. It is a Board of Education appointment. He expects Herbert. . ."

She walked through the shut world of the store with her shoulders thrusting. She moved as through a sea toward air—strained for the street. She threw up her eyes and took in the air of her own world once more. —This is hard work!

.

Lotte was there with a shawl about her head.

"Isidor, I must take Herbert . . down by 59th Street. The teacher . . ."

She stopped. Isidor's eyes were high, shut away, above clasped small hands. He prayed. She waited, watching his shut eyes. His eyes were still, beyond swayed head, mumbling lips.

He came forth from the counter: "We go together. . . I close up."

She made no reply.

City Block

They walked up the street with the low sun red in their eyes. The boy leaped ahead, lounged behind. He was glad. Adventure to be so walking through the streets with mother and father. Both! A blue car scraped to a standstill—for them! Adventure.

The car lurched them on. A stress of fateful purpose in the lurch forth of the car that for them had scraped to a standstill: in the outlay of fifteen cents: in the fact that *Schul* would be missed.

The City rose in hard high words. Each building was a word, each street they swept by was an accent in the ruthless wording of fate, their fate, as they moved Southward into knowledge. The City was a sentence, harsh, staccato, in an alien tongue.

Lotte clasped Herbert's hand.

"Come now, darling. Quiet, yes?"

They rose on stone steps.

The hall was a cold silence to which their feet spoke fearfully. They had no other word. The plastered walls gashed long against the blood of Lotte moving toward Dr Finney. She felt beyond the head of her child—he was a blotch—her man, beating with her, moving with her inevitably one, as though the silence of the world were a rein that bound them, drove them together.

They sat in bright varnished chairs in a room of gloom.

Herbert was a black blotch before Lotte full of the glow of her son. A big man stood . . . bright

City Block

against Herbert and her little man, clasping his hat: a stroke from top to nadir against the glow of her son. A round red face, yellow hair sparse, gold chain laid on a blanched vest took Herbert away. The door shut. . .

They sat vised in the fixity of waiting. Their being there, still in the room, made them one with the room: they and the room moved onward to a real thing she could not yet see. Time was unreal, waiting was unreal. They moved over a sharp horizon.

Lotte sat in this room with her man: and her child beyond under the cold clear eyes of a strange Doctor. But she sat waiting no new being, she felt how all of the world was about her like her flesh about her heart: how it swung ahead into certainty. She could not pray. She could not feel the need of prayer. God was about her in the certainty of life . . like her flesh. God was of her sitting there and moving there toward the words of knowledge she was soon to receive.

The words that she approached, the harsh syllables of the City she had moved across, her son and God were one in an immobile ecstasy she, moving forward, limned and partook of. . .

He stepped in to them alone—above wide vest, within wide face eyes little and blue, cold and impatient.

Words came . . his words . . words from a Doctor who knows. —Words for my heart of my son: words born of God within cloud of her life. . .

City Block

Listen, these words, lay them hot and cold in my open heart which the Sun has opened. . .

"I suppose," he looked down at a card, "Miss Klaar, I suppose, has prepared you for what there can be no doubt of. . . No doubt of, my dear people."

He looked at them. . . The world is one, these words of a world that is one. . . His eyes danced blue against the fixity of the room that was theirs. "There is no doubt, my friends, your son is not only backward, very backward, will never be anything else. . . You see how he is now. Do you? His body will grow big. . . He is healthy all right. You feed him—too wisely. Well, he will always act just about as he acts now. No use concealing that. . . Be just as childish and foolish—and stupid—as he is today. . . There are things he can learn. . . Not what he is taught where he is now. We'll have him placed in another Class where he belongs—with others like him. Lots of others like him, my good woman . . . where he can learn to use his hands. Some crude simple job. . . Never fear, there'll be work always—crude work of the hands—drawers of water, hewers of wood? we need 'em, I guess—he will be able to do. . . No more."

His eyes stopped dancing beyond the two dark figures, fixed on the woman. . . "No more," his lips pushed out again, to her. The blue eyes gleamed, struck her black calm, came back, trembling, screaming, within him. His face paled. He turned.

He flung open the door, joined their son to the two dark figures.

"Good evening."

He tried to break the daze he felt in his clear rooms. "Remember, here's the address . . his new school. Prepare yourselves to seeing his body grow big—bigger than yours—America—and his mind stay childish. . . Goodbye."

His hand sucked out, clasped the hand of Lotte who stood.

He held her hand: there were no words in the world: he felt behind the daze of his clear rooms a stream of strength moving resistless toward him from this woman: toward daze in himself.

3

The Sun was gone behind the Westward City. It threw its radiance into the sky, and the sky was a fused soft clearness over their heads as they walked . . a gentle and warm sinking into night was the sky above City. Houses, dying in shadow, fusing with sky, stood like words spoken.

"We will walk home, Isidor."

"Ain't we goin' to take the car?"

"No, son. There's no hurry. Taking a car costs lots of money."

Herbert leaped ahead, lounged behind, glad of this adventure of moving through the City, far from home, with his mother and father. Both!

They walked slow, they walked still . . within the glow of the day. A constant measure they were before and behind their son.

SEVEN
JOHN THE BAPTIST

THE room was bright with the sun. Three stories up. Three dark halls, three worn stairs, the mustiness of walls to which grimed hands, worn shoulders had rubbed their intricate soiled burden, held up this room that was all bright with the sun.

The door was open: two windows with their mesh Dutch curtains were thrown high: Clara Jones dusted.

She was a short woman, colored a dark brown in which were shadows of blue and orange. She was of indeterminate age. She worked slowly, diligently, with a sort of submissive rhythm to the sweep of her arms, the sway of her head: as if an invisible Master timed her work with gentle strokes on her bent back. The contours and objects of the room were a familiar haze against her hands. Her eyes did not take in the books upon the mantle, the morris-chair which her hands groomed and shifted, the cover of the couch which the room's tenant used for a bed. Her eyes were focussed dimly beyond the room, beyond the sunlight also that did not make them blink—beyond the sun. At times a murmur as of words answering in herself, a shred of tune, came from her. And these were in unison with the rapt measure of her work. And it with

City Block

the distant fixedness of her eyes that moved as if to remain fixed upon some point either far within or far without herself. . .

A tall young man . . almost a boy . . stood in the door. He buttressed both his palms against the threshold's sides: he watched her.

Her face turned to her shoulder: then fell forward back into its somnolent rhythm.

"Lor! that you already? You-all *quick* this mo'nin'."

"May I come in?"

"Sho'ly, sho'ly. Sit down over th'ah."

She did not stop. She held a broom in her two brown hands. With a steady stroke of shoulder back and forth it went, rasping . . swinging: her small soft body cadenced to its stiff advance.

"Tha'ah you are, Mr. Loer!" She waved a musty rag over his desk, over a picture nailed above it. "Th'ah you are."

She turned and smiled at him. He was still standing in the threshold. She had a round small face, and her big mouth smiling seemed to cover it. Her eyes were still focussed distantly.

She dropped the broom against a shoulder and flung the rag into the fold of an elbow. She laughed.

"What yo' got, this mo'nin'? I'm done. Come along in."

"I don't feel like being alone this morning, Clara."

City Block

Clara's smile was tender. Her face tilted to a side.

"Lonely, Mr. Loer?" she said. He felt caressed.

"Oh, no." He stepped into his room, lifting his knees unnecessarily high. He sank down in the morris-chair and primed a pipe.

"Clara," he seemed to hold her, "how'd you sleep last night?"

She folded her hands.

"O fine, Mr Loer. You know I always sleeps *fine*."

"Well I slept rotten."

"Ah wouldn't sleep none at all, Mr Loer . . ef Ah went to sleep same as you does."

He looked up from his pipe. "What do you mean?"

"'Thout prayin'. Yo' tole me so, yo'self. No wonder you sleep rotten. Lor! Ah wouldn't sleep none at all . . ef . . Ah went to sleep 'thout prayin'." She paused. "Watch out, Mr Loer," she said with a sweet tremulousness. "Supposin' the time comes when you cyant sleep at all."

"I don't know whom to pray to."

The old woman looked at the broomstick standing against her shoulder.

"And you so—edicated!" She ambled out, still keyed to that impalpable warm measure kindling her feet, her hips, the drone of her soft voice.

The door's gentle click made him alone.

He relaxed forward in his chair. Crumpled

City Block

hands held his sharp fine chin. His eyes were disturbed. They wandered. They saw his room: sharply each object in his room caught in his eyes and held there. His eyes were hurt because they saw no further.

He jumped up, flung his coat. He ran his fingers through the high blond hair. He faced his books.

Spencer's *First Principles* . . . *Introduction to Anthropology* . . . Dewey's *How We Think* . . . like long splinters in his eyes. He shook his head as if to shake them out.

Then he took the Psychology book and settled, rigid in his chair, to read.

His mind held back. It seemed stiff and small, dry and remote. It gave no attention to the book. It gave no attention, now, to the movement of his body as the book fell from limp hands and he was stepping to the corner where stood his 'cello.

He placed a stool. His body flexed and grew coordinate as it received the instrument. Softly, with eyes arching beyond him and his mind still gone, he began to bow. His mind held away no more. It broke forward. It leaped, it sang: his fingers moved with delicate precision making slow music.

. . . The street. A woman, tall, clouded in dark glow, whom he had seen, whom he had seen in the street. His mind out there beats against her uprightness: his mind is a sea beating and breaking

City Block

against her. It went up, it went down—as did his fingers—availless.

. . . His mother. There was no doubt, she reminded him of his mother who had died when he was a lad in Holland.

Karl Loer bent his face upon his loved 'cello and played deep plaintive words. He saw the woman whom he had passed so often in the street. . . She has arms piteous toward a man who is her husband. She pleads with her arms. She wears a straight black dress. And underneath her dress he saw her breast. It is bleeding! There is an iron bar, clamped hard and close, across the breast of the woman!

His fingers stopped. He drew his bow dazedly back and forth. He jumped up.

"O you! O you!" he cried, clutching his instrument. "I could wring your neck. I could dash you to bits——" He lifted his 'cello in violence with both hands above his face. Softly he laid it on the couch.

He stood now with eyes free and found that he was thinking of his life.

"What nonsense! what nonsense!" he began. He had forgotten how he had begun. . . —Mother, this woman . . two women I have never known. He loved his mother. He recalled her stately and dark in a town of light plump people. He recalled her lovely in a world of clods.

The whole world knew that she had been unfaithful, and had disappeared . . disappeared forever

City Block

and forever: that was Eternity, her disappearing . . after his father turned her out. He and his two brothers knew how sensual indulgence grew like the fat upon his father, clogged him, clotted his brain . . and he had turned her out. His father's soul shrank famished, he was a sucking brute. Then he was mad . . she was gone . . and Karl had come away.

America! He brought to it, he thought, his yearning and his music. He dwelt in misery. He dwelt, it seemed to his free eyes, in misery that grew more deep, more blind.

He wondered why.

"I have a good mind," he said aloud. He swung his chair to face the row of books upon his mantle. So he sat looking at his books. Proud of them. —I wonder why?

And as he sat, he forgot the books that stood within his eyes. He thought again of his mother. Why had she been unfaithful? what had driven her, and what his father? Was his brutality the work of sorrow? Had she found joy in that Eternity where he had lost her? . . Sudden like a stroke across his brain, the woman with white breasts crushed in a clamping iron; her piteous arms stretched toward a man—not he.

He walked up and down. He forgot the vision.

"There," he said aloud with an emphasis that was a plea, "there is what comes of Music . . of emotion. Idiotic ideas . . visions. That woman . . what do you know about that woman? Rot!"

City Block

He bent down and picked up the book that he had failed to read.

"Here's the place for your mind," he said aloud.

"You," he turned to his 'cello, "you'll go on earning my living." He stroked the fragile wine-hued wooden breast. "For a while. . . But you'll not boss me, hear?" He stood the instrument away.

There was a knock. Clara with a letter.

He took it. He seemed strangely perturbed. He laid the letter, unread, aside. As she reached for the door, "Clara," he said.

She turned.

"Clara," he said again, "why are you so happy? What have you, Clara?"

Her round face was all warmth and smile. She found her ease on her feet.

"I had fo' babies, Mr Loer. An' ev'yone of 'em died, afo' they was six. An' my husband that I nussed fo' ten years—he was sick ten years a'dyin' on his back—he's gone too. They is all in Heaven, Mr Loer. They is all waitin' th'ah fo' me. Ev'y oncet in a while, they comes to me at night. I sees 'em, sees 'em standin' th'ah as clar—why as clar as you is! An' they speaks to me: wuds as clar—as clar as mine is. They's all gone and safe, awaitin' for me up th'ah. Tha's why Ah'm happy, Mr Loer."

Old woman and young man stood very still, looking at each other. Karl stirred first. His hands, then his head. He walked up and down. She was still.

City Block

"But Clara—but Clara——"

She beamed on him.

He stopped. He smiled also. He grasped his cap.

He rushed into the street.

Into the street his smile and her words went with him, shredding his speed, eating into the mood of his release, until his smile went and he stood stock still.

The sun splintered into the Block, from the East, through mouldy cornices of houses. Men and women moved separate upon stone, moved from sun to shadow, brokenly. The day was yet too young to have welded them into the substance of the Block. Each was a particle thrown out from a separate home.

Karl stood, looked down through the scatter of men and women, the scatter of shade and sun. Athwart shoulders and skirts and hats that bobbed like dark flotsam in a golden sluggish stream, he saw a man move up.

A weight rose from his bowels, clutched at his throat. The man he had seen once, with the woman he had seen often! Her husband. . .

A sense of omen cloaked his head and made him dizzy. He felt only his body free, his head was cloaked. The street was suddenly a force, physical and relentless, fixing him there within the channel of this man.

City Block

He could no longer fight for the fading word in him: folly!

The man was almost abreast of him standing to face him. There in himself he heard, sharp like a fusillade, the words that were his own.

"I'm stopping you! Because your wife's in danger! Look at her! Who put the iron bar across her breast?"

A young man moved leisurely upward. A smile on his ruddy face, his red lips mumbling as if he discoursed amiably to himself. His eyes wandered amenably. He saw Karl. Something furrowed his brow into a question. Karl swerved aside. They passed each other. . .

And now the word that had been fading . . "folly" . . shrieked. It besieged him and shrieked. It was very brave.

"Fool! Fool!" —What did the words mean? Why am I in the street? Why did her husband cross me in the street?

His mind reached for the surety of his mantel and of its row of sober books. These casual things could be explained. He was lonely. Perhaps he was a bit . . unreally of course since what did he know of her? . . in love. Nonsense.

He jerked his cap over his eyes. —Look at her! Take away the bar! place your arms there! . . he returned to the house he lived in.

The area-gate was open: he went in by it.

His mind, he was very sure, was master now. It was a hard fight of course. He had had so little

City Block

training! For so very long, he had weltered in emotion. At home, the emotion of rage and of salvation against the brutal gluttony of his father: the emotion of faith against the crass certainty of his world that his mother was bad. And in America, above all, the emotion of hunger. With one way only to destroy it . . . his easiest gift . . . the emotion of music with which he earned his bread.

—But it shall not master!

His mind pictured the book on Psychology upon his mantel. —I'll learn about that. And then some day I'll dash the old 'cello . . . no, absurd! . . . I'll sell it.

His feet led him into Clara's kitchen.

She was alone. An ironing board was laid from table to low shelf. He saw her back. A bent old back . . . a small round head . . . a mass of touselled hair dusted with white. Yet as the bare arm pressed the steaming iron he felt with a new poignance how a wind, tropical and fresh, wielded this woman.

He tiptoed in, sat down and watched her. The rhythm fleshed. . . A naked woman, tall and firm and glowing like red earth. Her hands were above her head. Her hands were flowers with the wind in them. There was a tree above her. And her long bare feet, with the straight toes, were somehow intertwined with the tree's roots.

Clara moved to the farther side of the board so as to iron and see him. Her shoes were huge misshapen shreds of leather barely holding about her feet, so that but for the glide of her body, her mov-

City Block

ing might have seemed a shuffle. He saw her smile now over the board at him. He thought of a rain cloud saturate with sun.

"Clara," he said, "I should be studying. I'm a good-for-nothing. . ."

"Yo' mus'nt say that Mr Loer!" As her words came, her arms went pressing the steamy steel. Her shoulders spoke in concord.

—Nigger woman . . you are all *one!* . . . What a strange thing to think about a person!

"No, Mr Loer," she crooned, "yo' mus'nt say that! We is all good fo' som'pn. We doan know what a heap o' de time. But we all is——"

"How can you be sure of Heaven?"

She rested her elbow on the board. "I done seen it, Mr Loer. I sees it . . *offen.*"

"How do you know you see it?"

"How do I know I'se a seein' you!"

"You could describe me, Clara. Could you describe Heaven?"

"Why ob co'se I could! What I sees I can describe. . ." She ironed. "It's a great big place! Mos'ly light . . glorious golden light! An' angels in white wings an' harps asingin', asingin'. . . When yo' play sometimes, Mr Loer . . them waily shatterin' tones . . dey sings like dat. Dey music . . it starts *away* down an' it leaps *away* up!"

She ironed.

"Clara, what would you say if I told you that was all a dream—what you saw."

She beamed and ironed.

City Block

"The wise people, Clara, the wise men who study deep and who write books . . they say all that is nonsense."

Clara beamed. "Dey ain't wise, ef dey say that, Mr Loer."

She was bent over her towels, beaming upon her towels. Towel after towel she ironed, folded, laid upon the pile of towels at her side . . her brown face beaming.

She stopped. She straightened and looked at Karl. Then she went back to her work. . .

2

Karl was at work. From twelve to half past two, from half past six to twelve six days of the week, Karl played in the Trio at The Bismarck. Played sentimental music . . grime of German and Italian soil, froth and scum of Broadway. He drew with his bow complacencies and veiled obscenities . . at work. His mind and his senses in revolt leaped away toward life: swirled, delved, circled: beaten, brought back to his heart which sent them a burden he could not understand, would not accept: of Pain.

His eyes saw the café for whose lounging patrons his hand fingered, his hand drew a bow. His eyes saw his associates . . clever, ugly . . Stumm with bald blonde-ruffed head at the piano; Silvis, the leader, dark, agonizingly eager to be artistic swaying, who was a muddy cloud about his violin.

City Block

Karl at work and his mind and senses beating out of tune.

The flamboyant German Hall: smoked wood-work, paneled and carved in Gothic sayings, beer-mugs and flags under the somber rafters like brittle colors falling, unable to rest. And in the sudden alcoves, men and women: idle eyes that took in so little, moist mouths, distended bellies that took in so much. Karl bowing an aria from *Bohème*: and the crass glint of the Hall with its arrogant beer-mugs, its mottoes, its elbow-leaning guests currying his mind and his senses as they yearned forth toward purer air. . . The bald head of Stumm was round, it rested upon his neck like the head of a pin. His wrists bounced up and down. They dragged Karl back from the purer air he sought. Silvis crossed a knee upon the other and swayed with a small finger fluttering from his bow. His eyes were half-shut in an absorbent leer . . . absorbing Puccini whom he loved. The weak grace of his body, swaying, leading, sucked Karl from his need to be away. . . Karl at work.

Last chord. *D A F* sharp *D*. . . Stumm swung about on his stool. Silvis' legs stretched forward, abdomen collapsed—like a bug stiffened no more into organic form with the creamy fluid . . . the music . . . now all oozed out. Their words scraped Karl's head. When their words spoke to him, it was this day as if their fingers touched his lips.

"Lehnstein says we are going to move for a raise next Fall——"

City Block

"Did you hear about his wife? I guess she's his wife——"

"Why don't Max bring that beer?"

The hard loom of the Hall, the coldness of men and women abject before their senses, taking in heat . . heat of air, heat of food, heat of sex . . into their coldness: the soil of these two men, his partners, playing this parody of life for an unreal living: himself with truant senses reeling back and bringing to his heart what pitiful crumbled fragments:—a woman stately with white breast clamped in iron, a woman with brown beaming smile, all One, a woman of whom he knew no good, no ill, save that she had been his Mother—: or to bar him from these a row of brittle books upon his mantel? . . Karl with a burst of pain he could not understand, at work making his living to know that this was life?

He covered his 'cello and stood it away in the corner made by the piano.

"Ain't you going to eat?"

"No thank you."

He was in the street.

Where was his mind? What was he suffering for? What about?

A lovely day. Here was pure air. Why did he breathe it and not taste it? He wanted more of it than he could breathe. What was air? Why was it pure ironically to him?

Long stiff rows of dirty houses exuded like sweat and excrement his sisters and his brothers. Cold

City Block

houses sweating in the Spring. Sick houses emptying their bowels upon Spring.

He climbed by stairs into a house.

A swarthy little man in a great white vest with gold chain larding it from arm-pit to stomach, opened the door. Hands brandishing, lying, welcomed him.

"Well, Loer! . . . Come in."

"Just a moment Dooch. I'm in a hurry."

—Hurry for what? What am I hurrying toward?

"—Will you as a great favor, Dooch, take my place tonight at The Bismarck?"

Brandishing lying hands: "O my dear fellow. Y'know I'd love to—anything to help you out. But I'm so busy . . . lessons . . . lessons all day. I must have my rest. At night . . . the only time. Why don't you ask, let me see . . . well Facker'd be glad. . ."

—Another visit? "Ten dollars, if you'll do it, Dooch."

Hands dropped from lying. "Well, you know, I'd do anything for you. . . Half past six?"

"Thank you, Dooch."

Hands sincere, palm upward: waiting. A bill in a hand happy, silent.

Once more the air. . .

.

Sudden Karl heard these words in himself above the beat of his feet: "I have never learned to use

City Block

my mind. It's hard. That is what hurts. . . It will come."

His legs walked on. He walked through desolation.

"O God, let me find *something*—" He stiffened, hearing his words. "Of all prayers, if one is absurdest, this is the one."

But he walked still through desolation. He sensed how he walked swiftly. Interminable houses were a heavy fluttered Canopy that passed him: banners they were of some arrogant Dominion, dragged through mud, stiffened in frost. They shut him out.

Warm air. It was Spring.

Children went under his beating knees like the drip of frozen houses melting in Spring.

"Let me think! What do I want? . . . Something more solid than air. . . Something as pure that is more solid than air."

His right hand clasped his left wrist behind him. His knees and chin thrust forward. From waist to shoulder he tended back. So he walked.

He walked through his life. He ached as he walked through his life. He felt himself trample. He trampled what he felt.

Was it not clear? Clarity. He had lived in a pigsty. He had come forth. He was young. He would make a better way for himself in the world than the way of Silvis and Stumm. He would study, he knew already, and was it not good that already beyond the bowing of fiddles he had won

City Block

the trenchant accent of Reason—Spencer, Darwin, Dewey? He yearned toward the ecstasy of their release from mists and frowns . . . from beer and Puccini. A crumble of old churches falling in dust, drenching the air with dust. He had hands to tear down. He partook of the ecstasy of the release that lay in clear books, clear eyes, hands tearing down. . .

His father goes to church. He saw again the great stomach and the little eyes and the twist of the wreathing mouth . . . the heft of fat red hands he felt . . . they were sodden in hair . . . beating against him, beating the children of his father's house. Karl's arm swung at his side, his chin no longer thrust. He felt now his mother's voice: it lay like a warm purple scarf against the chill of his thoughts: his mother had a red sweet mouth shut upon her Mystery. She moves beyond the shoulder of the Town like a sunset bleeding. Karl's hand clasped a wrist once more beyond his back. . . The woman whom he had seen in the street and who haunted him . . . he struggling against her.

"Think! Think! Conquer yourself!"

He walked now heavy and stiff.

"Very well. What is she?" he fought.

He turned upon this woman with clamped breasts . . . this Myth . . . this nonsense. Why was she like green fields? why was his mind like lead? —Married . . . a stranger! O she was suffering, he knew.

—Once I spoke to her: but my lips trembled.

City Block

"No. I am married," came her pleading whisper. . . But her hand moves toward him.

A complacent clod of a little man. But husband. Married. A stranger. . .

Why was his mind a forest of hot trees when he needed a path? A pavement. Hard, clear, cool, like here where his feet were pounding.

Tedium. He played in a waste of soiled senses. He walked through a waste of frozen thoughts. He was frozen in tedium.

He sat down, for he was tired.

He opened his eyes.

8

The East Park whose greenness gasped its scanty stretch between the loom of the streets of men and the black tumult of the River. Here he, sitting upon a bench. . .

Before his eyes first, two boys play tether ball. One of them strong and with fresh eyes swung his racket well: it rose from a clear forearm, muscle-moulded, mazed with faint gold sleeping hair. His mouth shut firm as he stroked. Against him, a boy, shorter, dark, older. He lunged with mouth slant open, and dull feet. One of his eyes stared wide, the other was half shut. He lost swiftly.

The victor stood bored, easefully: looking beyond for a comrade who did not come. Saliva wet the chin of the other, whose effort had been great. His hand hung, palm forward, near his knee.

City Block

"Let's try again," he said. "You give me your side where the sun's not in my eyes. That's fair." They exchanged places. The battle went on, the same.

Karl was very tired. He leaned back in his bench.

In three straight strokes came to his passive eyes Sky, River, Park. The sky was steadfast and still: the river was dense and still, boats and waves moving upon the river were like the shiver of sun-motes upon a steadfast sky. The park swayed under the stillness of sky and water. Its swaying was a word that came from moveless lips, its swaying was a word of stillness issued from moveless lips. Three horizontal strokes, in the eyes of Karl, of a world that did not move.

Stillness came within him.

He turned his head from side to side, as within steadfastness, not stirring it. He saw no more, no less by turning his head. He was within a Focus where all was steadfast and where stillness was all. He moved his hands, and felt how he was wrapped in movelessness. He was not prisoned. He was free, fluent, felt the accessibility of flight within stillness, within changelessness as within air.

He sat upright on his bench and was not tired.

He swung his left arm slowly under his face: he felt how the world swung with him so that naught had moved.

Upon the cuff of his left sleeve a spot caught him and made him focus his eyes. . . A cockroach moved

City Block

on his cuff. It moved. It moved against the world. It lied.

It flowed into the mass of his right hand. It was crushed. It was killed.

He said aloud: "I am sorry, life. But I cannot have you around."

He was not surprised at his words. The cockroach was a memory of what had never been, fallen beneath the Word of his movelessness.

But his words were another stroke, perpendicular to the three-fold stroke of Park and River and Sky. A stroke cutting along and lifting a veil before his eyes. The movelessness of Life won by this fourth stroke of his words another dimension still. So it was that things seemed to happen. Within his immobile vision, he watched things happen . . people move, sun slant farther beneath the green fingers of trees . . as if this fourth stroke of his words saying 'Things happen' were a knife cutting a cord, unfolding a magic parchment.

Men sat upon benches as he sat upon a bench. Men had feet on a pavement as he had feet on a pavement. Men had faces written with thought as he had a written face.

All this he saw as if it were happening just now. There was ease in his soul which took each happening and put it away and knew that all was one.

A man with a black thick filthy beard, black bushed eyebrows beneath which glistened black eyes, a man with a nose inordinately long from his sooty brow, moved upon legs that carried him cir-

cularly, level, as if his legs were wheels . . moved about. He dipped his talonous hand into a refuse can: his shoulders swung like the walking-beam of a boat. He dipped the other hand. There was refuse in his hand. He put it in his mouth. He dove under benches: he ransacked the scanty grass: he sought refuse. He put it in his mouth.

As he ate, his black eyes looked at Karl; they gleamed with a joy so full Karl breathed against the glisten of his eyes sparking air.

A little man with a face ghostly white, lips red like a gash of blood soaking through chalk, a little man with up-pointed shoulders and sleeves that were tatters to the elbow, moved, isolate, intent: picking up scraps of paper. Each scrap his fingers feverishly smoothed, his lean eyes bent and read what was to read. Then his fingers tossed the paper from his eyes behind his back . . eyes roaming, roaming to another scrap.

As he read each message, his lips moved: as his lips moved they bled.

A man wide as a hogshead, short as a boy, wider than long, black as black earth, a negro dwarf with a huge head sat . . legs dangling from a bench and looked at Karl. Karl saw him. The dwarf raised a hand to his head and doffed his derby hat. Courteously he smiled, swinging his hat and his arm. He had white separate teeth and no lips. Beneath the frowse of his muddy trowsers, were patent leather boots. And they dangled.

City Block

As he bowed, Karl knew within the patent leather boots his toes were twitching.

Karl sat easefully and still: and was not surprised to find beside him on the bench the bearded tramp whom he had seen so often, here and elsewhere, on his walks.

The tramp had always interested him: he had always wondered what could be his story. But always a reticence, savage or divine, fended this shambling blond man who with tender eyes, a long beard and skin transparent, blue-veined, now sat beside him. This man he felt, speaks to no one. There is an embryon word, yet dumb, sheathed by his presence. They sat before in this Park on a single bench, it had been impossible to touch his eyes.

Slight and frail man beside him. Karl did not turn his head to look at him. By virtue of the four-stroked vision within which he dwelt, he saw him clear with his eyes beyond.

He saw between the straight blond beard and the arching forehead touched with delicate hair, a face young and worn. Sunken cheeks with blue shadows: blue eyes gleaming in red sick lids: a hidden mouth: a nose straight and fine and singularly sharp. He saw, lost within the aged suit of brown, a tenuous body: and at the hip beside him a huge excrescence . . . a sort of tumor . . . swelling the trowser leg which elsewhere hung in folds.

Karl sat and let the world play and was aware

City Block

of himself and was aware sharply that he was at ease as he had never been before. Yet it was ease, for he knew it so, and somehow he remembered.

From his side a voice very thin, articulate like the faint etch of acid on a copper plate.

"I shall call you what you like as we sit here. My name is Peter Dawes. What shall I call you?"

Karl answered: "I have no name."

"You call me Dawes, then," said the bearded tramp, "and I shall call you Peter."

Karl-Peter nodded within himself, to himself he nodded.

The tramp went on: "Across the city the sun goes down. It will soon go down to the Palisades. They are high there, that makes the sun low. Do you see?" He was looking eastward.

Karl-Peter nodded within himself, to himself he nodded.

"Look at the little Park," said the bearded tramp.

From the Park's straight plane, the sun was away. The hands of the westward trees were empty. But beyond his shoulder, above the wall of tenements stood a flame: it leaped up into sky and fell upon the Park.

The Park was thick now with stillness. It was low, leaden-green: it was thickly still under the leaping glow of the sun that was not there.

Within it, moving . . . steadfast in Karl's eyes . . . were busy men.

They pressed to and fro, furtive, intent, secret from one another. The two boys at tether ball

City Block

kept exchanging places: the game was forever the same.

Under Karl's eyes was the black face of the long-nosed man. All of the face that was not in hair was in grime of coal, save the huge nose that was white and the eyes that were clean and hard like a clean black sky.

He spoke: "My name is Theophilus Larch. Thank you, Theophilus."

His quick hand delved into the cuff of Theophilus-Karl's trowser. It held up the dead cockroach.

The long-nosed man had teeth very white: they closed on the cockroach with a joyous crack.

The little man of the red mouth was in Karl's eyes.

"My name is Martin Lounton. Call me Lounton, Martin. . . And permit me." . .

He seized Martin-Karl's hand. He smoothed it with feverish fingers. His lean eyes sought the palm of it and read. He tossed it from him, and was gone, feverishly peering under bench, in grass, for scraps of paper.

The black dwarf bowed under Karl's eyes.

"My name is Caesar Dott. Call me Dott, Caesar. And allow me to congratulate you upon your wedding. Your Bride gave me a favor, from her own hands she gave it. Look. . ." He raised his trowser leg and there against the obscene mass of blackish flesh was an iron bar, toothed and clamped in the flesh.

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"It makes my foot go to sleep. I have to wriggle my toes." . .

Karl sat still.

The strong boy and the idiot boy who played tether ball forever, forever; the eater of dirt, the dwarf, the picker and reader of scraps . . joined hands. They were unknown to each other. But they knew Karl. They joined hands. And they danced.

A heavy, shattering measure. It made the glow of the gone sun tremble, bounce up, join in. It shook the trees until their branches with little leaves like bells reached down into the Park and the trees danced also. It broke into the sheerness of the house-walls and they rose stiffly and danced. All danced . . moveless in Karl sitting upon the bench beside the bearded tramp.

He breathed in measure.

A row of houses swung into the Park and the Park swung into the River: and the River suddenly straightened upward and thrust like a lance, quivering white, to the Sky. The Sky came down in a great gust of wind and lifted the beating feet and garlanded the trees among the dancing legs of men, and stuck branches into the windows of the rollicking houses. Karl breathed in measure.

The stillness was very thick like a night without clouds and with neither moon nor stars.

Now, in the dancing stillness like a single star, a voice:

"Think!"

City Block

The tramp was moveless beside him. His voice: "Think! For the Time is not yet."

The star-voice neared, no longer the moveless tramp's. It pierced, it was a shriek. . . "Think! Think!"

Karl jumped up from the bench. "Think, think!" he echoed.

He thought. He beat with his thought against the dancing world. He lunged and thrust: he hewed with his thought and beat. He beat the Sky up: he beat the houses back. He thrust the trees down. The strong boy and the idiot boy, the eater of dirt, the dwarf, the picker and reader of scraps . . he hewed and beat apart from their thick dance. He trampled with his thought the Park into the ground. . .

Then all was as it should be. . . And it was as if he had fallen an unfathomable distance.

.

He sat upon his bench under the darkling sky, alone, beside the bearded man whom he had seen so often.

He turned to him and nodded.

The tramp's reticent blue eyes nodded and turned away.

"It's getting late," said Karl.

He was tingling, as from a mighty fall that had not killed him . . that had made him drunk. An infinitude of space coursed through his veins, as he

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had coursed through an infinitude of space. He was daring as never before.

"Would you mind," he turned again, very courteous, very quiet, toward the tramp, "would you mind, sir, telling me who you are?"

The look of the frail man was steady and beyond him. His words came still and very far away through the straight gold beard.

"You have seen me often," he said, "and asked me nothing. You have thought. What did it seem to you, I was?"

Karl was light with the abandon of his infinite flight, sitting so commonly upon a bench. He was brave and clear, for his mind held one memory. . . what this strange man, the first time, had seemed to him to be. The words came unhindered.

"It seemed," he stopped . . he began again, "the first time that I saw you, I said to myself: 'He looks like a ridiculous Jesus.'"

The bearded man gazed on beyond him. His head moved dreaming. His hands floated underneath his beard.

"You were right in what you said to yourself," he spoke. "For I am John the Baptist."

EIGHT

HOPE

HE was walking a long time. It seemed to him he was walking always . . walking toward no thing . . walking away. He had the sense of himself very white, very dim yet sharp: white thin throat weary with breathing, white brow weary with pressing through black air, white feet weary with walking away. He had the sense of himself a white thing walking forever from the dark, through dark. . .

He had no thoughts. His past was the wake behind his feet. He sensed it arching up behind him to a black horizon, arching beyond horizon, the wake of his past . . a thing that was not he and was not the darkness: was the stain of his white passing along upon the dark that passed never. . .

His past was beingless and thoughtless. He was moving whiteness, his past was where he had moved. Yet certain knowings went with him. They were without dimension. They were impalpable like odors. He moved, a white moving, and with him emanations . . things he knew about himself and the world . . frail pitiful things, impalpable like odors.

One knowing: he was lonely. One knowing: his loneliness was not a birth of his leaving his beloved, but his leaving her was a birth of his being lonely.

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They loved each other. There, between them, growing like a tree, his loneliness. Like a tree clefting a rock, his loneliness: as they clove together, as his arms were about her body, as his mouth was upon her mouth . . . loneliness clefting them asunder. It spread. It blossomed. It spread up until its branches were sky, until its roots were earth . . . until its trunk was life between earth and sky. His loneliness blotted out his beloved. His loneliness blotted out himself. He was moving whiteness, moved by loneliness to walk forever away.

He stood at the corner of the Block and tried to change himself into a thing that thinks.

He tried hard: his legs hurt: he tried to think of that. There was an empty whiteness in his stomach. He tried to think of that and of the simple way . . . there was money . . . whereby he could recolor his stomach red. Against his brow black fumes of people moved . . . slow, tragically, men and women in black shoes pushing white faces away, moving against each other forever away through black.

Lost long strokes . . . white soot in blackness streaking from before his eyes, into the pregnant distance . . . men, women. Little balls of tremulous commotion . . . black all about their whiteness moulding their whiteness . . . children. Above his hat, the Elevated Road . . . a balance in sonorous black where all that was over it and under was contained. The structure so immediate above him, so

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infinite beyond him, was a Word. Its recurrent meaningless boom had meaning for him. He stood, white upright wisp, and listened to the word of the murmuring, pounding, failing train, to the refrain before and after of long black beams parting the dwellings of men, swung between mists.

He took this, satisfied, in place of thought.

The airs of self were free to touch him. He knew now for long he was wandering the City. Long, he had no thought of his beloved, no care. He knew that soon he would stop. His whiteness . . because he needed so, so hoped . . was going to stop.

The street corner where he stood was sharp. Blackness still. But each particle in his eyes stood away, stood up: each particle like iron dust was suddenly within the sway of a hid Magnet so that each particle stood up, yet otherwise did not move.

A saloon with garish yellow light and yellow wood. Grey pavement. Desolate forms of men like lamp-soot on the yellow wood, on the yellow light. Grey pavement.

Then in the foreground of his eye a sudden force upon him, a slow thin form. He saw her big awkward hat, her shoes stuck out from the wood stiffness of her coat. He saw her wrists stuck out from the stiff wool arms: two hands, luminous, sinuous, flexed . . hands moving in air. The air that her hands moved wreathed in volumnear curves like the curves of a slender stem of a flower, to her head. This he saw also. He saw within the black

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of her stupid hat a smile toward him. He felt her throat.

He left the yellow light. The grey pavement here was gaseous, clouded beyond. In the dim, he knew the woman beside him.

She walked. Her parting the blackness left a wake that sucked him subtly, slowly. Not horizontal but in true measure with her was their way: the spirallic leap and dip of an uneven hoop. There was a heavy door and a room . . he quiet beside her.

He was aware of quiet. The gas jet spat light with a rasping breath. It and his breathing and her breathing were encased in quiet. The room was thick and muffled. Foul walls that were thick, the heavy scarlet cover on the bed, the painted door . . made the quiet. These were a fabulous womb about her breathing and his and the gas light.

She took off her hat. She took off her wood-brown coat. She turned her eyes upon him . . the white of her eyes. Then her hands uprose, they swam upon her like fish deep in dark waters. She took off her tawdry one-piece dress. She took off her heavy shoes and her coarse stockings. She ripped soiled flannel, sparking, from her skin. She lifted the scarlet cover and her black body slid within the bed.

He flung away the cover. Her black body lay on the white sheet. He looked at her body. She looked at her body. It was a black still thing, flowing forever within itself, moveless beyond its

City Block

boundaries which were white. And within its blackness a glowing cloud of white, making it blue, making it yellow and blue, making it blackness alive.

He said to himself: "Now I had better think."

He took off his clothes. He let the room close in on him, touch him everywhere . . at his throat, under his armpits, at his thighs . . the foul-padded room. He lay beside her. He said to himself: "Now, think."

He lay still, stiffly. She seemed to heed him, so. She relaxed beside him. She lay relaxed. Barely her skin in the narrow bed touched his.

So they lay: gaze threading upward like untroubled smoke; he stiff, she undulous easeful, black like a buried sea: both still.

The wave of her was measurelessly long as if some tiding force . . no wind . . with infinite stroke caused it. He felt himself white. He felt this blackness beside her. He was not stiff. He was not moving away. He knew, in her blackness, the white mist running through: saturate white, invisible from the blackness of her body, making it alive.

A great need filled him. He . . separate white, living through black . . felt the need and felt the power to be merged in her, to join the white mist that made her black alive.

Passion, pure beyond object, lifted him so. He took her body: it was body: black dead body she was. So he took her. So he made her alive. He

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was impress of life upon her substance: he was song.

Before his eyes was dark void. Falling through void threads of white, globules of white: in his eyes this woman's body: falling through it, himself.

.

He lay smiling with shut eyes on his back.

She left the bed and knelt on the floor beside him.

She kissed his feet. She kissed his knees. She took his fingers, pressed each finger one by one, on her eyes. His fingers were cold.

She beat her brow, dashed her brow and her breast against the iron bed. . . .

NINE
CANDLES

†

WHAT a big place this is! Would you think there could be trouble in my fitting here? . . so big a place? . . I so small? And it's all but one name . . New York . . shorter than mine which is Godfrey Dunnimore Carber. Names do not count, it seems. I am a bit of a man with a seven-syllabled name in the vastness New York.

Dora, your name is like the City's. Short: they sound alike. You too enclose me. But so differently. It in hardness, you in softness. It in indifferent storm, you in the calm of love. New York has a top of sweeping stone. You have hair. Your eyes are brown and the eyes of New York shriek white: white eyes that make a noise and cannot see, and that peer blind at night.

Your hand turns the knob outside. There you are, Dora.

You come toward me, I love you. Within the black crinkling skirt your legs move back and forth . . soft tender legs. Within the white waist is your flesh: full and firm: ripe like a rose. You are a marvelous bloom of ripe white flesh, coming toward me. You make little noise when you walk or when you talk. . . And I count vastly! In your

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arms I count. I count One, alone, in your arms.
You love me. What is the City?

There is a place for me in the City, but it is
not a business place.

I taught school in Maine. I shall teach school in
New York.

Lads and girls sat warm and pliant within
benches. I placed before them tablets rather bitter
on the tongue, rather hard to get down. My hand
placing each tablet gives a caress that has no name
and that passes therefore with the tablet down into
the heart of the boy, into the heart of the girl.
There! I'll do it again, since there's no place for
me in business. What odds? Room afloat in a field
with trees at one side and pasture at the other.
Room that's aswing between the seasons of snow
and of green, between the worlds of soil and of sky.
Here a room propped stiff in a pile of bricks with
other stiff rooms like it. No swing between the
meadow and the trees, between the snowdrift and
the violet shadow. No swing at all. But the
benches the same and the young sheer song of my
girls, and the silly tablets of knowledge, and my
caress that salves the tablet and that is good, being
nameless.

No good things have names save myself and my
wife Dora and my girls. Other names mean lies.
School that does not teach a thing and that would
be terrible void without my nameless caress: or
New York that has no right to sound the least like
Dora . . these are examples.

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Now there's another name that doesn't mean a thing. . . Dora says to me: "Dear, I am going to have a child. We are going to have a child." She puts that name on us. And it doesn't mean a thing. There is Dora: here am I. Where is the child? "In me . . . down here in me!" He's not there. I don't feel he is there.

Dora got fatter. Sudden spurts she had of getting fatter. Her growing was not like a gradual hill, but like a stairs. I always said: "He's not there. I don't feel he is there."

And when he died (the little baby who had said no word, who had scarce cried so little alive he was in the lash of life ere he died), I went in to Dora.

She lies soft, spread-out in our bed. Like the pillows and bedclothes. Warm, tender—but caring more for me than the bedclothes that let me slip in and that warm me, yes: but don't feel much for me. And I said:

"Dora, I told you he wasn't true. I told you I never felt him there."

She looked at me. I know what was in her eyes: "The pain of him . . . that was true. That proves he was true!"

But I paid no heed to her eyes.

"You see?"

She wept. She lay there soft and spread out, and the tears fell heavy down her heavy cheeks . . . pale heavy cheeks.

"Don't cry," I said very sharp, for I could not bear her tears. They made my nerves start in a

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rushing panic: fly out from within my flesh in myriad ways like a thousand beasts with hard hoofs in my flesh. "Don't cry," so I said, "about someone who never was. Don't cry about nothing." —My pain and my longing . . my agony and my love: so spoke her eyes. —What do you know? aren't these real? But she lay silent.

"It is nothing." I spoke higher. I walked up and down the room. "The baby was not real. I told you so! Wouldn't I have known if he had been real? Wouldn't I have seen him in your flesh? Wouldn't I see him now upon your breast?" I looked straight at her. Dora stopped her tears.

"You are real," I cried. "Dear Dora . . all of you. That is real! Your heavy braided hair atop your head, and your square long chin and your hands. We are real, Dora. Don't you cry about nothing."

Sudden her eyes that had been in tears were dry with looking. She looked at me. Terror looked at me. Her long lips pressed and the lips were dry. So she stayed . . spread forth in our bed like a silence upon it. . .

.

I am happy. O, that is plain even to me, and most folks who know about themselves are precisely they who can not say: I am happy.

I am happy. Dora is out of bed. It is our bed still. No one has been in it beside us, no one has been in it between us. It is our bed, our night:

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even there are no dreams to stand between us. And she, unchanged, is lovely for me to behold.

I open my eyes . . I may close them again if I wish, and I do wish for she lies still beside me. It is not yet seven o'clock. At first when I so opened my eyes, I turned and with eyes clear looked at my love. She lies there, lost in the bed save for her hair like a brown bloom; and hidden, half her face slumberous-warm, all lost in two softnesses—her sleeping and the pillow. But she turns her head, she opens her eyes, feeling my eyes upon her. They open with immediate knowing of my presence: they smile the rounded knowing of her heart, at all hours, all depths of sleep or waking, that I am right there. Now, when I so open my eyes and it is not yet seven, I shut them and so see Dora. Lying on my back I see her as I will: her planturous hair and her shut eyes and their glow: see her breasts large but firm against the gown, and her hands that, when we are close, move on my skin like a mother's . . bathing me, bathing me all.

It is seven now, for Dora jumps from bed. A match scratches: a gas jet spurts: water pours: water bubbles and boils: bread toasts succulently in the air of my world: and in it, close, my bed and myself shut eyes on my back, knowing the making of breakfast.

"Godfrey, get up dear."

It is a way to start a morning.

We sit in this way at table. There is a newspaper, it does not come between us. There is the

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food, it takes no space between us sitting across the table silent, save for sparse words, eating our breakfast.

I love her so . . with my eyes shut, in bed . . or across from me at breakfast and at supper: or in the reticence of shadow, of occupation, of half sleep. She helps me on with my coat. There is the square room hoisted on a brick-pile . . school . . and the clear crisp children (girls alone since I am in New York) breaking out from their benches like young grass from pave-stones. Dora along, the glow of her hands on my skin, the bloom of her hair in the world wherever I go.

And now, still so . . the child was never there, since he is not there yet. What difference? God is good to a small man with hair thinning and at thirty getting grey, who taught school in Maine, who found no business place in a very large city full of gaps and holes, but who can teach school still, handing along to his girls the caress of his Dora to him. . .

But I do not want to see your breasts, my Dear! I do not question. It is easy enough. You were ever modest. In a swift blaze of our room, your modesty burned up. You are modest again. We do not look upon each other as we undress. A turn of the wrist puts the gas out. As I creep toward you, as I lie a moment gentle close beside you, gentle still now upon you, creeping up, creeping down, there beneath my chest your two great breasts upstanding—holding me, my Dora, as your

mouth my mouth! . . . Your breasts have not changed.

.

It began to snow while they were still at breakfast. It snowed all through lessons. Through recess, through study-hour, through lessons again it snows. As the school doors burst open, the world is snow: the school rooms were hot holes in the falling snow-world. Naught is steadfast save the snow falling.

There is a visit far uptown for Godfrey Carber to make.

"I'll not be home till late, dear," he has said at breakfast.

"Not be home after school?"

"No, dear. Tillie Lenbach's father . . he's had an accident. He's at a hospital where they took him . . near where he works . . in the Bronx. I've told Tillie I'd go up with her and see him." . . .

They press . . tight bodies bundled in grey . . through the blue dance of snow. The girl's hair is cowed by a tam-o'-shanter, the snow warms on it and her brow is wet. His slouch hat lies unsurely on his hair which is full of starlike flakes, melting, renewing. At crossings, he takes her mittened hand. They are happy. Their knees with almost equal measure prance against wind-flung sheets of the jolly snow. They pass a post of hostile boys primed with snowballs. He is struck in the shoulder. "O," cries the little girl, "I can duck much

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better than you!" "You think so?" he challenges back. He stops and pulls off his gloves. With a firm ball he meets one of the post across the street, strikes him clean on the chest. A volley misses his head. Shouts! They march out of reach. "Goodie!" she admires.

In the long hall, thick with chloroform and the drench of swabbed wood, washed linen, their bodies, geared to meet storm, glow roaringly against the debile steamy air. They are happy no more. He thinks of Dora. —I shall be back home soon. Her thick coiled hair! The visit is a pause, a barrier to pass ere he returns to his Dora.

The sight of the man coming out sheer from the rows of suffering beds sickens his nerves. He is encased in fragile pain. —If I move I tear against this poor man's pain. Blood will ache out. There he lies with his crushed legs: here I stand with crushed senses, as if his hurt touched and crushed me.

—Dora soon. The firm full flesh of her . . her arms, her eyes. Air soon!

He takes the hurt man's hand, and pain like a shower of splintering glass is through him. His words of amity are from lips pain-bled as by glass: even his eyes, seeing the unshaven face long, gaunt, and the sticky eyes and the sticky mouth and the moist haired chest, are cut by what they see.

"Tillie'll stay longer . . . I must go." He is gone. —Dora has a smile like young summer. Now back, now back to Dora!

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He jumps on a car. But its lame progress against snow, against carts stalled on the track, against the black mass . . man . . filtering in and away, wears him. He is back on the street, ploughing through the snow: about him dark streaks of men and women, ploughing, ploughing.

The blue streaming snow-world turns inside out to dark: this the night's coming. Godfrey makes his progress. —Dora soon. Home soon! Soon the marvel of her girlhood who is strong like a mother. . .

Here is the Block. Endless long. —How can my feet, pushing little fragments of the snow-full Block, push it behind me? Feet push. . . Feet push, behind, little bits of the Block. The flat looms up. The stair looms up. The door is open ere he reaches it. Dora! . . .

—*She is not young at all!*
Her eyes are heavy and dull!
Her hair is no coil of Spring!
Her breast sags! she sags!

—A woman who has suffered and who has had
a child!
Death greys her!
She is no mother. . . She is matronly!

He came in dazed. His body, like a draughted fire, roars with the storm it has passed through. So his mind. He thins away: what he sees thins

City Block

with him. A haze looms from the impossible impact with storm and sudden truth, longing and a fact! Good haze. It is about his eyes . . . shutting all out—all Dora.

“I am tired.” The room spins faintly. —How little I am! He feels like a thing half burned.

She undressed him tenderly. His head lagged, his eyes were dim and far from her working upon him.

She put him to bed and gave him hot brandy. He slept. —I grow! . . . For the first time in their bed, inviolate till now, a dream came to him. . .

—She is full Springtime.
Her hair coils like June.
Her hands upon me
Flower my flesh like June.
Her face is June
Upon the earth of my longing. . .

He opened his eyes. Beside him lay a woman in the dark. “Her name is Dora,” he murmured, and dreamed on.

2

Dora has formed a habit of going to bed early. I come home. She pushes up from her armchair with a great rustle of the morning paper scattered from her lap. She brings the supper. She puts the supper away. She washes the dishes. —I sit

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with my fingers weaving, hearing her heavy step
and the bright peal of the dishes. . .

She goes to bed.

I do not inquire too deeply why she goes to bed.
When she is gone, I shut out the gas and I light a
candle. I sit very still . . long . . looking at the
candle.

—You are fair. *You* are My Dora.

Can you not come inside?

Look! I burn a candle for you:

The room is a dark jewel:

Can you not come in?

So gaily you walk, you beside me walking.

And we do not walk city streets and parks.

Lo! we walk within ourselves.

—Look! I burn a candle in the room:

The room is a dark jewel:

Won't you come in?

We shall look at the flame as with one pair
of eyes.

We shall be sitting, not in the room of a
flat . . .

We sit stilly side by side, hand in hand,

Within a world shut like a jewel,

Secret-warm like a kiss,

And clear

Like this fire in the night.

City Block

At last I am sleepy, half-hidden in dream. I take off my clothes. And Dora in the bed does not disturb me. . . This is my life. Do I hear that? Godfrey Carber, this is your life.

I see it all a little darkly aslant from my eyes, like a light in my brain, like a light just caught by my own eye's corner: I can't catch it nearer to the front. If I turn my head, however slyly, it moves alike. If I spin, it spins. It has to remain so ever, aslant and aloof . . my life. Words thrown at it bound vaguely back into my knowing: with 'I have been there' glowing like fire upon them: little glowing balls cast up from a black sea.

There are two kinds of Quiet. There is the quiet of Dora in bed. There is the quiet of the noisy streets that I walk with My Dora. After school-hours, after supper often. Naught breaks into the quiet of the streets. Naught breaks into the quiet of Dora sleeping save very rarely, when Dora gets up from bed: thrusts her head into my gem-like room, "It is late, dear." That is now so rare it is altogether of the past. Sometimes, Dora groans in bed: in her sleep or awake . . I do not know. For if I am quiet, the groan passes, all is good.

My Dora lives in quiet . . in the two quiets.

My Dora speaks in quiet.

One time, the quiet of the noisy streets . . a mottled quiet grained like marble, hard so too, hard to break . . was broken. A large man loomed. He had glimpsed My Dora in the crash of an elevated train that must after all have made a rift in the

City Block

day's stillness, since the large man saw her. He spoke to me.

"I have seen her. Loveliness," he said.

He was gentle, not a bad sort. Sad at my splendor, empty of splendor himself. I shook him off with ease. Later, once, he came to me in the Park. It rained. He spoke to me. He was dry and hot like crackling twigs in flame, under the drench of his clothes. He spoke to me. He was still gentler, sadder at my splendor and his lack. Poor boy! he had invented a sort of splendor of his own. It did not work. As if one could *make* glory! He was sad. I shook him off with ease. But his face high above mine looked at me long that day, breaking into the quiet of My Dora and myself who moved like perfumed breath through the wet world.

No other break in the Quiet where My Dora blooms like a rose ever young. . . I must say it: the wife behaves very well. She leaves us alone! But she is cruel nonetheless. For doesn't she oust My Dora from our home: during mealtimes chiefly? when I am sick chiefly? when she nurses me. Dora must get to bed and the gaslight which is her friend must be shut down . . a candle burns . . ere My Dora comes into the room.

Of course, I must have Dora to feed me, to mend my clothes and buy me a new suit when I need it: and send me to have my hair cut (my hair grows so fast even if it is growing white): to tell me that the examination papers must be marked by tomorrow: to give me a plaster when my neuralgia hurts. It

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is too bad. It is as I have ever known, and as I tell my girls: life is not perfect. We must put up with life. And we must not complain. God has given us sleep, full of dream: silence, full of dream: night that is Dream. So we must not complain. And God has given us fire that is His breath: so that we may be warm and may see clear: Fire that burns away all doubt, all imperfection . . leaving the Real. God has given us Dream that is night and that is fire.

—But, My Dora, though you are ever young like a rose just blooming, you grow. You grow! It is your love for me that boldens you. You invade my house. Even at mealtimes now, you are there. You eat of the food she sets upon the table. And after supper, ere the candle burns, your hand lies in mine, and your tawny hair gleams at my side.

Dora's step is heavier and more slow. It takes her longer to clear the table, longer to wash the dishes. . . A great crash! —a dish is broken. I leave you, My Dora, a moment: your white hand in mine, at that hideous noise, is gone. I stand in wrath at the kitchen door.

“What a noise!” I am severe.

She winces from my eyes. Her heavy dull face winces and is white. She will be careful not to break more dishes. At least while My Dora and I are near to be disturbed.

And although she goes to bed early, earlier ever, it takes more time ere her shuffling, ere the creaking

City Block

die down: ere there is silence in the distant bedroom. . . It is good in a way that she groans more often in her sleep. For so, we have got used to the groans. They do not hurt us more. They do not break our Quiet. They have become like the noise of the noisy street . . a part of our Quiet.

.

She saw him so clearly: what a pity that she had pain more and more. For pain made her seeing him hard. Lovable child, all swept in the lilt of his own dream: he was not one to grapple with life. His was the sweeter gift of being clasped himself, of being drawn beyond. She understood what must be the stuff of his dream, since she knew the stuff of his life: his pale far eyes, his faintly trilling fingers, his hair like silk. And the little feet pattering away and the thin nose scenting what wide adventure! Such he, such his dream. What he wanted of a wife was ornament and a nurse. After the child's death . . quite long after . . his eyes had looked at her so that she knew she had failed suddenly of the first part of his need. No ornament more. She could still be nurse.

But the pain grows bitter, her strength ebbs. Dora was forced to a doctor. —When I am awake I can hold myself still. But what if I should groan once in my sleep? And he hear it! That never! How it would upset him!

The doctor studied her flesh. As she lay before

City Block

him with her thoughts so far from his studying eye and ear, from his studying hands, her flesh was unreal to her. Her thoughts must be hidden elsewhere than in her flesh: or he had touched them too.

"An operation only," said the doctor. "No other chance. This is not new. Surely some other doctor . . . ?"

"There has been no other doctor."

"How long since the pain?"

"Years!"

He eyed her with wonder, with anger: calmly at last. "I'll consult with your husband," he said in a dry voice.

Dora's cry: "No! Not that!"

"Not that? . . Why? . . Why not that?"

She stood, her pain lost in panic. Her fists and her voice went up.

"I don't have to explain. What I say is enough. Mr Carber must know nothing of all this. That is all."

". . . And the operation?"

"Useless. . . Doctor, how much do I owe you?"

.

The heyday of My Dora! You do not leave me more. We are one now, you and I.

—There were places . . chill empty places . . how can I make that clear? like little rooms cut off from the light and the warm, where you could not enter. A grey partition, so thin and yet so hard, 'cut

City Block

them off: grey cold and blind. And part of my life I had to live in them!

—No more! No more . . in this heyday of our love. Then the thought that it is Noon . . Noon always . . leaves me too. The thought was but a flash like a sudden cloud over high sun. When the sun is free, there is no flash and there need be no thinking. I can not tell, save in the little flaws of our noon, that it is Noon. I cannot tell, save in the little rifts of running shadow, how I am happy.

“Come Godfrey. Breakfast is ready in ten minutes.”

It is a voice. Beneath it, if I looked, I might see a heavy body: grey unluminous strangeness that walks about getting breakfast and that has a voice calling me to eat. Her chair rattles as she draws closer, breakfasting across my table. That noise, like her sudden calls of pain in the night, does not harm our Quiet.

—My Dora

Yesterday

There was a voice in the sky

Fluttering like a banner across the Block.

All gold . .

All gay . .

Against the Spring blue sky.

—I have had enough to eat. I go down the stairs. We walk the quiet street.

City Block

—My Dora
That banner voice
Across the street
Stood at a cross
Upon our azure path.
Gold blue, My Dora, is our way
Under the whispering sky.

—The children sit in their benches. Above the wood, their eyes and their hair rise free: and rise toward me. We have much fun. There are lessons of course. But the look of their eyes is blue, and the shine of their hair is gold. We flow together. My Dora is not there. She is not jealous of my hours of class. My children are not jealous of My Dora. At the last gong, at the door's wide thrust, within the bare harsh quiet of the street, there she is; there is My Dora!

We walk. Seldom I touch her. I feel her feet beside my feet. I feel her hand beside my hand. I feel her eyes glowingly near my own. We are one height. But she is fairer to see. And I am rather rough . . a big dark man with black beard and black eyes against her. She loves me so. I am very big. She is slight and frail. Yet we are of one height from our feet to our hair.

We walk. Seldom words. But her voice is ever there. It is golden like a daffodil and frail so, faintly a-wave on its shrill green stem. The street is quiet . . no matter where . . so that her voice is high and yet is still.

City Block

—How quiet is the city! It is full of still houses, still men and quiet women. The cars glide silent: on the cobblestones as on plush beat the mute hoofs of horses, the muffled wheels of carts. Silent city. Only the children trill in it: a low vibrance like that of early springtime flowers . . . anemone, hypatica, violet, cinquefoil in a waking field.

—How soft is the city! Houses soft and men and women soft (O the soft hands of the men, the soft eyes of the women!). The cars move like rubber balls bouncing on soft steel tracks. Only the children are a little hard: like the chirp of little hungry birds, demanding, hungering . . . hard. My Dora's love rises above the soft still town like a singing tree.

—What do you think? Should we go back to supper?

We go back. Up the dark stairs, My Dora fades for she always lets me go first; push the darkness, push the door open for her. Dora is at the threshold. I nod. I go in first. My Dora comes in with me.

She brings us our supper. Sometimes she says a few words.

“Did you see, dear, in the paper——”

“You know I never read the paper——”

“O yes. But this. About the raise of the teachers——”

“When I gave you my check, you would have known.” . . .

City Block

She cooks our food. She washes the remains of our food. She prepares our bed. She leaves us two alone. And the room of our world has now no hard partitions! It is all one: it is all flushed with the sun and the light. Come, My Dora. All is here for us to live together.

.

So the day and the year and the years.

There are days of rain and of snow. There are days of heat and of cold. —Your sun shines forever. If my eyes are shut, still it shines. If my body is in pain, still you shine! She has nursed me, fed me in bed. You are there! I am healed. We walk again . . under the endless sun that has no eyelids and that has no sleep, that knows no season.

. . . Year and year and years.

8

Godfrey Carber's wife lies beaten in bed. She is sick. She can no longer move. She is beaten.

She lies . . she lies. Scraps of food to feed him he finds. He finds Chaos.

The chaos presses against him: bites him, pushes him, eats him all up. The chaos makes the little man roam with eyes distressed. "A doctor! a doctor!"

It is night. He sits in the room. Room that is a jewel too dark.

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City Block

—You are the dawn of Spring
Dawning forever

. . *faintly.*

—Your hair coils like June.
Your hands flower my life
Like a June field dawning

. . *faintly.*

—Your voice
Above the still world
Rises, a flower.
You in silence . . .
You My Dora

. . *faintly.*

. . . A jewel, the room, too dark. He sits at the table with the untouched food that he has rummaged from the cupboard. He lights another candle. Yet it is too dark.

He sits in his room . . frail man with hands that twitch and a brow heavy with cloud of grey silk hair. The doctor comes in from the bedroom. The doctor watches him. He prods him at last from across the table, with words.

"You must have courage, Mr Carber. Of course, you have expected this."

Carber looks up. His eyes, bewildered, turn about the room.

"Do you mean," come the doctor's words, "do you mean you haven't *known?*"

City Block

Carber's dim eyes wander.

"Look here, man! Look here! Hasn't your wife had a doctor before me? Am I the first? It isn't possible. Why, this must be fifteen years old. Why, this is the *end!*"

Godfrey Carber's eyes are fixed on the sharp man's eyes. They do not wander. They see him turn and pass away through the door. They see his footsteps . . . clouded in what? in anger! . . . lead down to the street.

Godfrey Carber got up. In each hand he holds a candle. He walks into the dark bedroom.

She lies gaunt and heavy. The light dances in a leaden face. Her eyes are shut. Breath breaks from blue lips like a slow moaning sea breaking upon a rock. A hand, heavy knotted, jerks on the coverlet like a fish dry on earth, almost dead.

He places the candles on the table near her head. He stands.

"Dora."

Her hand that has gasped is still. Only the candles move. Only her breath beats moaning.

The two Doras died, before the candles were done.

TEN
—AND CHARITY

A MAN sat dangling a cap between his legs on the top step of a stoop. Behind him the open door into the house. He waited, let the noisy Block lift in waves to his eyes.

It was a part of town that he came to, seldom.

"I wonder," he thought, "has she been living here long?"

His mind moved back to the letter he had written her, to the restaurant to which he was going to take her. Before ringing the bell, he had explored the avenues a bit for a suitable place. He did not think really of her, conjure her up at all, compose from questions in his mind a picture. He sat and let the street . . it was high Spring . . fling blossoms of sound and color against him.

Through the brown house moved a small girl downward. She felt for dark steps with her toes: with her hands, adjusted again the new cheap-made flowers she had trimmed to the old hat—for the Spring.

The man felt a moving through the hall. He got up and turned. A girl on the vestibule step above him. She stared at him, without comfort.

"So it's you—Lucy Dargent?"

She nodded with blue excited eyes.

City Block

"Glad to know you," he held out a slender hand. He saw her clear, she was plain. She touched his hand with a moist little paw. She did not sense him.

"Well: ready for dinner?"

They went down into the Block. It leaped above them, color and swung sound: it columned into eddies that made them corks. Then they settled, walking, under the Block. Both had the sense of pushing against a palpable substance.

In the restaurant it was still.

He ordered food.

He put away the card. In the stillness, they looked at each other.

The girl saw nothing. She leaned on nothing. She was unafraid of stillness but she needed words to lean on.

"You haven't told me a thing," she said, "'cept that you knew my mother."

"I knew her very well . . . before you were born."

"Not after?"

"No—not after."

She saw him now a bit, as if he were rising from his words. He was young to her, very jolly, he had nice teeth. She liked the tightness of his jacket.

"Did you—like my mother?" she asked.

He laughed. "Worse than that! I loved her."

Then she laughed also. "*Loved her!*" She was mocking.

"Why not? Wasn't it possible to love your mother?"

City Block

She shook her head. Then she blushed. The blush was strange on her coarse dull skin.

"You're so different," she said. "Of course, Ma died when I was a kid. Twelve. Five years ago. She was so heavy and gloomy. Not like you."

"She wasn't that sort when I knew her, Lucy."

The girl's silence was abrupt, as if the next step in words had been deep down—not to be taken.

He felt it. He let her remain in silence. Now she could lean on that. He saw what she was. He took what she was bravely to himself. And whenever a new point told upon his mind, she saw him smile and throw up his head and press her to eat more.

She was a little drab body, very dun save her bright eyes.

He felt himself there too. Against this crushed girlhood his resilient self. —I am thirty-eight, I am younger and fresher than she! But there was a hardness still in her. She was not yet pulp. He hated her stupid hat, her sticky hair. He hated the hard starched waist she wore. He hated the narrow skirt that crowded her legs. She was a poor little girl, dressed in lies, lost in lies. He began to put questions to her. . .

"I've been at the one store ever since I left the Orphanage. Two years and over. Yes. Sure, it's all right. What do you expect? Happy—?"

"These two years behind a counter——"

"Who, me? Oh no. I just got that high last December during the rush. Then back to parcels."

City Block

"Well, you've been beneath one roof. . . And I've been wandering through seven States."

"I don't really know a thing about you."

She was trying to be coquetish. Drab small coquette. He knew he must not let her try to flirt. It would be too drear a thing, her trying to smile from fullness like a woman.

"I'll tell you about my wanderings. Should I?"

She looked at him wistfully, pressing a piece of éclair against her lips. She wanted other knowledge.

"Have you ever seen especially pretty chairs . . or bureaus . . or tables?"

She knit her brow and looked diagonally up, then she shook her head.

"Well, there are such things. Chairs that beside being good to sit on are good to look at: tables that one can use and also enjoy. I make 'em."

"Who, you?"

There was no doubt, she was stupid. His art interested her not at all.

"Did you ever hear of a man who did such things?"

"Who, you?" she said.

"Well, I *do*. And I earn lots of money by it. I saved up a lot of money and two years ago I left New York and went South."

"What for, if you were making decent money?"

He took her question, poised it, decided to laugh with it. He leaned back in his chair, laughing.

City Block

She saw his shoulders go up and down; she was pleased that he laughed.

He told her about the South: places where there are only negroes who sing in the hot dark: about the Indians glowing in hard Western deserts. He found she was scarce listening to his words.

"Waiter, how much?"

From his irritation, he looked at her again. It came to him that she was having what she would call a 'good time.' She was doing her best. This knowledge came to him also. It brought pain. So he smiled.

Out of his very broad smile she settled in her chair and kicked out her feet and gave a smile to him. He got up, shaking his trowsers into place. He was tall, his body spoke with articulate rhythmic muscles. Blond hair lay low on his forehead like a boy's . . . a boy's forehead.

"Let's get out of here, eh? Where'll we go?"

She reached for her clumsy blue coat and said nothing.

"What would you like to do?"

Her face was blank. He studied it. It was not blank when he looked at it straight. Words, simply, did not touch it. But it was not blank.

"How's your room," he asked, finding her still silent. "Could we go there and talk?"

"Where, mine? . . . Sure," was her answer. "Why not?" . . .

The Block was less like a sea: a swollen river it was, running away. He walked beside this girl:

City Block

he tried to feel how she was there, who she was: he failed. The world had heavy eyes: it was a woman suddenly who told stories to her children, to each child a story suggested by the last: a woman who on warm evenings was weary. The world was a woman who sweated and wore no perfume. He walked beside this girl and tried to see her. But the world was suddenly very old and dumb.

He followed her upstairs: up two, three, four long flights. A wheezy brownstone house, three houses in a row elbowed by tenements: once people had lived in them: now they were old and cruel, they lived on people.

He stood in her door and struck a match. She took it, went into dark, lit the lamp. His heart hurt as the room in which she lived flared to his eyes.

A bare little room. Airless, hot—stiff little room. A small bed half filled it. There was a bureau with a strip of oil-cloth, a statue, chipped, of a Shepherdess, a glass full of hair-pins, a brush, a Bible. Upon the Bible, he read *The Hope Orphanage*. It looked like a new Bible. He guessed, when she was ready to go into the world, they had given her that Bible. In a corner was a chair, and a towel-rack. Behind a drapery of acid green, her clothes and a small trunk.

"You sit in the chair," she told him.

His heart took the room and this girl and tried to fit them with himself. He wondered whose was the lie: what did he have to do with this lie he felt

City Block

there? His heart went knocking about the four walls of the room like a huge grey moth; trying to find where to get out: and about the rotten soft-wood floor and the ceiling. Then it stopped in front of the starched waist of Lucy, it looked upward at her throat. His heart went knocking about this girl, now, trying to get in. . .

The shade was up, the street was a pulse upon Lucy and the man in the lamp-blotched dark. He began to talk. He said:

"You must let me tell you about your mother, Lucy. You were only twelve when she died, so you say yourself. Your Ma had lots of words perhaps, but she wasn't a woman to let on really about herself. You scarcely knew her, I imagine. Let me tell you about her."

"Go 'way back then," said Lucy listlessly.

"What do you mean?"

She bent forward. She sat on the bed stiffly, as far from him as she could. One hand at her side, half behind her, pressed a pillow.

"Before she was married, I mean."

"O sure." He felt a new responsiveness. He was glad, though he could not understand it. "In those days, your mother . . well, she was big of course. But she was strong, wonderful strong. She wasn't slow. She was sure, that's all. She took her time: whatever 'twas . . moving across the room or getting the man she was after."

Lucy giggled. Her hands waved vaguely in her lap.

City Block

"Was she after my Dad?"

"O he loved her. But that's not what counted with your Ma. Don't you think it! What counted was that she wanted *him*. She got him."

"He was only twenty," Lucy beamed.

"O you know that?"

She folded her hands and looked at them.

"What else do you know?"

"O nothing. Just, Ma told me once: 'Your Pa wasn't even a man, God damn him. When he took me, he was twenty.'"

"Your Ma was right, girl. She was a fine strong woman."

Lucy settled back upon her pillow. Her head was propped against the bar of the bed. He was glad. She seemed coming to ease. He went on bravely.

He spoke about the virtue, the suffering calm virtue, the strong character of Lucy's mother. Lucy leaned back, feeling the iron bar gratefully against her neck. She picked at a nail, at a thread: she was engrossed in her hands. He spoke, not letting her mood nor his awareness of it come against his words. He spoke orderedly. He did not mention Mrs Dargent's husband. He was there, merely behind what he said like a black foil for her whiteness.

Then he stopped. The street was no longer a pulse, it was obtrusive. It lay out there, mocking his words. He got up impetuously, pulled down the window, pulled down the shade. He looked at

City Block

Lucy. Standing over her, he looked at her, and out of his look he saw her dim small face once more alive: saw the eyes brighten.

He smiled. He had been so serious speaking of her mother. Then, out of his smile, she said:

"O, to hell with Mother. . . Did you know—Dad?"

He nodded.

"Tell me *everything* about him!"

He stood still.

"What did your Mother tell you about him?"

"All she said mostly was 'God damn him!'"

She laughed.

"Well——"

"Well, *did* God damn him . . . ?"

He turned about and parting the shade looked out into the street. He laughed. Then he faced her again.

"You judge," he said.

She curled her feet under her upon the bed. She was preparing for delight. Sudden, her face was serious. She pulled out her feet: she took off her shoes . . . worn dingy shoes. They dropped to the floor.

"One thing the old woman downstairs does give you hell for—and that's shoes on the bed." Her head was forward from the iron bar. "Go on."

He stood still. "Jack——" he stopped. "You know of course what his name was?"

"Jack."

He nodded. "I've got to call him Jack, you see.

City Block

Do you mind? I can't be always remembering to say 'your father.'"

He smiled gaily. He saw her hands wriggle. "Jack——" she tasted the word.

"Jack was a scoundrel."

She settled back, relaxed, curled up, oblivious of her hands that had a way of wriggling, and of stockinged feet half hidden by her dress. Through a hole, a toe showed. He saw it very white. He went on:

"But first . . let's admit it . . first, Jack was a boy. Rather wild, dreamy. Rather decent, though. *Before* he was a scoundrel. Always played fair, I believe."

"You liked him?"

"Then Leila comes along. Jack was twenty. Leila was twenty-six."

"Jack was——" he looked at her, "well Jack was an artist too in his way. Full of dreamy stories. Full of play. He didn't have any mother or father." Her eyes warmed and grew larger. "And Leila was big and soothing . . sort of capacious. He saw a lot of her. He thought a lot of her too. You couldn't be lonely, I suppose, with her around. He'd been knocking about a good deal, for a lad his age. One gets lonely, knocking about. Leila seemed to stand for all sorts of things he had always heard tell of, seen in the eyes and smiles of other folk. Home: being taken care of: quiet: understanding. She was so splendidly strong! she was—I'll tell you what she sometimes reminded him of.

City Block

That'll show you. Jack loved music. In a café down on Third Avenue, there was a German lad who played the 'cello. You don't know what's a 'cello? Well, it's a great big fiddle, and it makes a mellow music soft and quiet and vibrating right down to your heart. Jack said to Leila: 'Leila, you're great big and you're deep, just like that 'cello.' Then they got married.

"... He was a scoundrel to do it, Lucy. Take it from me. He'd better have looked twice into his heart, seen what was there: and thought less about big fiddles. . . I knew what it was from the start. It was hell. It was not Leila's fault. Lucy, I'll tell you a secret. It wasn't his fault, neither."

"It wasn't nobody's fault?"

"Nothing, perhaps, is as much anyone's fault as you'd suppose." He saw her look toward her Bible. "Why not God's fault," he exclaimed gaily. "Let's have it that way. God's fault, eh? . . . God's broad shoulders——"

She was beating her hands together joyously.

"I'll tell you what Jack was those grand days he was wed—" He found to his surprise, he had been speaking standing. He drew the chair a little nearer than it had been to the girl. He looked at the girl. She was quiet. He felt a warmth there against the heat of the close room, to which it was good to talk. Unconsciously, he was once more on his feet. . .

"I'll tell you. When I was South, I saw one thing that I shall never forget. A lovely city . .

City Block

a Park all full of blossoming trees and flowers, and there, right in all that Springtime, five black men, dressed in stripes, dragging chains—convicts—sweeping the paths. Think of it! prisoners among flowers. I don't know how they must have felt. I'm sure it was like Jack felt, married. Twenty he was. The world was a garden at Springtime. And he in convict stripes, chained, sweeping paths.

“ . . . It just didn't work for him, Lucy. There wasn't anything in it for him. He felt he was a pet, no more, for Leila. When he saw the child a-coming . . . that was you . . . he saw nothing but bars and chains and sweeping of paths ahead. She seemed strong enough for two. He lit out.”

Lucy watched how, lost in his words, the man found his chair silently once again: not knowing he had left it. She watched, lost also in his words. There was silence.

The man emerged. He grew aware of Lucy.

“No doubt, girl, Jack was a scoundrel. Or say he didn't show much sense. That's worse. He didn't know his beating it was going to break her nerve. He was her golden dreamy fairy-tale-telling pet. How should he know she needed that . . . needed her pride of him . . . like another woman needs love? His beating it smashed her. I know what sort of a world you were let into, girl . . . with a fat nagging bitter mother to give you her breast, eh? and teach you that the sun was a liar. I can guess, Lucy—now. Looking at you. Jack never guessed. I'll swear it.”

City Block

The girl was silent. But no more relaxed. She was stiff and ugly with a thought in her heart. "I hate mother;" she said. "I am glad she died. . . And I don't blame—Jack." The ugliness and stiffness, with the last words, were gone. She saw the man: they smiled each with the other. His smile again in her eyes, warming and cooling her body: her response, casting a strange loosing spell through the limbs and lips of the man.

This time they sat very long in silence.

Again the need in him of speaking aloud. He had no sense of speaking to Lucy. Lucy did not count. He did not really watch her, although always he held her there, since he began his story about Jack. There was a sucking space in the close room, it made the room big with shadows, big with spaces.

He said: "Well, God did damn him."

The little body was solid and hard . . solid protest before him.

"That's not sol"

"Listen——"

"That's not sol"

He did not seem aware of her swift movement against him. He spoke in his chair. He leaned forward with his hands clasped at his knees. He spoke gently, looking just beyond his hands.

"Jack had a gay lark for six months or so. He went to Boston. Then, one time when he was out of a job, he came to. He found he was in love with his wife."

City Block

"How do you know that?" came stiff words from Lucy.

They did not budge him: "I know."

"Well, I don't believe it."

He lifted his head and looked at her.

"Now see here, little girl. That's a long time ago . . . as long a time as you are. But I know Jack found he loved her."

Her eyes went to the face of this man, touched him. She did not believe what she heard about her father. It was absurd and unfair to think he could ever, having known her, love her mother. But this man was talking warm words: whatever they said, words of love, words of stiflement and longing, there in his face was a glow as if a fire suffused him: within his eyes she could feel hidden a hunger of flame, needing fuel. What did it matter, the nonsense he spoke of her father? . . .

"A strange thing it was, girl, and I don't blame you for not understanding. He found he loved her. Why, then, didn't he go back? Going back would not have helped. It would still have been the stripes and chains in the Springtime Southern Garden. He loved her, but he loved Springtime too, I guess. Not for many minutes, I bet, did he think of going back."

"He never did!"

"He never did go back. . . Back, there was you: a woman turned slattern, eh . . . ugly, bitter, swollen with hurt pride. Am I right? You in her hands. You at that breast! And yonder, the God damned

City Block

scoundrel, Jack—" he got up, "dancing around the world like a sailing ship on summer waters: dipping, skipping, half-capsized in tall winds: . . . empty as hell."

He broke through the cloud of his thoughts: with knitted brow he stood there and at last saw Lucy. He was amazed at what he saw. She lay back, quiet and eased, upon her bed. Her hands were open at her knees. She was smiling at him.

A rage took the man. He needed to break that smile.

"You should hate him, Lucy!"

She was smiling, would she not listen to his words? He uttered them sharp, he let them come cruel.

"Look at your self. . . Thank *him*! You're seventeen. Twelve years of your life, how did you live to have come to hate your mother? How did you live? In the black basement of a flat where she was janitress, eh? O I know that much. With a fat woman in tears or in tantrums, eh?"

"She was quite jolly when she was drunk." The words came from her smiling mouth: they seemed part of her smile. The man drew in his breath.

"And then, an Orphan Asylum: a number that they feed. And now a shopgirl: a number that they starve." He walked up and down. "By God, child," he said, "I don't understand you. You ought to hate your father."

"Do you hate him?"

"This I know: God damned him."

City Block

Lucy jumped from her bed. She stood under him, white with anger.

"That's a lie!" she screamed. She beat her fists against him. "That's a lie!"

He stood unmoved.

She retreated and looked at him. Once more, she smiled.

She went back to her nook upon the bed. She curled up. She relaxed.

"How in hell would you know if God *had* damned him? You ain't Jesus."

He came a little closer, to feel her straight.

"Father—he was beautiful?" she murmured. But she needed no answer. She knew. Again, she asked him:

"When did he—die?"

"Did your mother say he was dead?"

"No. But I——"

"What?"

"Well, he is dead. I know that. And I know he ain't in hell."

The man stood very quiet. His hands trembled. His eyes fell to his hands.

"Lucy," he said, still looking at his hands, "why do you know—your Dad is dead?"

She was a face stern in the saying of joy. She was a face tempered hard in faith: resilient, glowing she was.

She said: "Why do I know? Because I know that he died. Because after mother died, five years

City Block

ago, he would have looked for me and found me. Because only mother——”

She stopped. He was afraid, seeing her words stop, that she would find his eyes. He seemed to feel her face a little whiter already, a little less hard, less a-glow: as if there was that in his eyes, moving toward hers, would break her.

He smiled. He felt a locking wrench in the side muscles of his throat.

Very quickly he began, very slowly he said: “Well, your Dad—he died some time ago, Lucy.”

Then, with this fending his naked eyes, he dared to look at her. As before, she was smiling. He dared to look at her smile. . .

.

She smiled. She was a smile upon the bed: relaxed, curled-up, with hands limp and open, with stockinged feet and a toe white against the black of her stocking. He dared to look at her smile.

“It’s your clothes are horrible,” he said. “That frightful waist!” His heart paled at his words. Then he felt them again. Again. They were true words.

Lucy wept. She did not hide her face. The tears fell down her cheeks into her open mouth. She was not tense with her crying. Her eyes were not red.

“You are different from your clothes,” he said. “They lie. You aren’t so ugly. I know now they lie.”

City Block

She stood. His breath was a shuttle going up and down against his throat, as he watched her standing.

She stood straight. Her face was stained with her tears. Her hands were suddenly quick with a keen thinking: passionate they were with her thinking. She undid her waist, she flung it off. She was corsetless. She stood uncovered above her skirt, next to the bed, with dry eyes challenging the man.

His eyes caught the whiteness of her flesh, and measured her. Her dry blue eyes stood up upon her body, proudly, challenging the man.

In stillness he came gently, he placed gentle hands on her uncovered shoulders. Her eyes burned into his. His hands twitched, melted. That which stood behind his eyes was molten, was moving: was gone. He was all molten moved beneath the heat of her challenge.

His hands, less gentle, were upon her shoulders.

A little moan came from her mouth. Her eyes closed. She helped him. . .

Very soon he left.

ELEVEN

THE ALTAR OF THE WORLD

LATHRAN let himself sink deep in his pillows. His gaze was clear to meet that of his friend, the doctor, who stood above him.

"I'm glad you had the courage to tell me, Steele. It was harder," he smiled, "for you to tell me than for me to be told. That ought to comfort you a bit."

"I will forgive you, Fred, if you'll stop, now, thinking about others. Now . . . at last . . . you might start thinking about yourself."

"Now, at last? Now less than ever. When I was well, Steele,—and had life and work before me, there was reason for thinking of myself. But now?"

Steele shook his head.

"Logical?"

The doctor tried to annihilate the term with his expression. But Lathran would not have it.

"You're more valuable than I. You? Any mortal that has a whole body is more worth considering than I. Why should I spend these last weeks contemplating an experiment that has fizzled out?"

Steele took the sick man's hand, held it close.

"If only there was a loop-hole, Fred, in your Empiricism . . . some flaw by which you could

City Block

convince yourself that you are . . . that you will not . . .”

He stopped. Lathran helped him out.

“Thank heaven, my mind’s whole, even if my body is breaking. There is no such flaw. In a month I shall be dead. That is all.”

He had half risen from the pillows. His voice was warm and his eyelids trembled. Steele understood.

“Do you want me to come, to-morrow?”

Lathran now looked beyond him. It was the rapt expression, the hardening of grey eyes that Steele had seen so often in the Laboratory when Lathran pondered an experiment whose outward tokens stood there at his shoulder on the table. His gaze went beyond the test-tubes and the scales, to be more purely fixed on what they meant.

There was a pause.

“No,” he said. “Don’t come, unless I call you. Your influence is bad, old man. Just this moment, with your sentiment and your . . . damned love, you’ve weakened me. Don’t come till I call you.”

He put out his hand, Steele held it. With his hand still clasped, Lathran’s face turned toward the wall.

The doctor went, wavered at the door, turned about: “Shall I call Janet?”

This time no pause. It was as if in his last stillness, Lathran had resolved a wide category. Almost silently: “No.”

Steele closed the door.

For an hour Lathran was alone. He rested quietly on his back. His eyes were glad of the white bareness of the ceiling. For an hour he was alone. For an hour he repeated, word by word, the talk he had had with Steele. The words had no logical sequence. They had rhythm. One sentence would return upon itself, recalling a phrase from earlier. All the words came, blanketed with a warm feeling that his derision—a remote part of him—tried to pierce through. The feeling rhythm was too thick for it. The talk went on within him. Vaguely now, since it was also about him. Sudden the derisive fragment flared, was lambent, obscured the words with its light.

—Why am I saying these things? Am I trying to convince myself?

A thread of pain ravelled up his face.

“Janet!” he called.

She entered. . . .

He knew that the doctor had not found the courage twice to tell the truth. She was there, smiling.

“I was told, dear, you wished to be alone.” A faint cloud went over her bright face as the thought implied in this told on her consciousness. But of course it was a mood: her husband could never really wish to be without her. She outshone it.

He had called her feverishly. But the distance

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took away his accent's value. She knew nothing beyond the proper fact that her ailing husband wanted her beside him. She sat down.

He talked variedly and lightly with her. And as he did so, it came to him that he talked falsely. For the first time falsely! His words and smile were echoes of a communion that had passed: were dowered with life and life was over. He turned within himself from this facile hypocrisy. Faintly, while his words went on and his own ears listened, he pondered the new process.

—Is not an echo real? Can't I be approaching a real world that merely my distance from it makes unreal? . . . Old geographers filled in with fabular pictures true lands and seas they had not charted. The mist drooping on the horizon will recede with the horizon as I sail on. . . He lost himself in these appraisals and found them sweet. A new flood of feeling came of them that made Janet near . . a new Janet . . washed out the hurtful gulf between them. The sunset sentiments were long and deep like sunset shadows, pointing a transfigured world. And in their play, new tints and values, infinite swirlings of broken light, moved murmurously. . . .

Janet left for his broth, he abandoned himself altogether to them.—They exist! He did not understand them. Their fact held him gently, and the same thrill came that in the past might have accompanied the promise of more sensuous enjoyment.—*They are!*

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He caught himself. The evening had crept up from the street and swollen through his window. A faint purple haze shimmered against the curtains where hours ago was Sun. He knew what this meant—the day's going. He gripped himself to face the symbol of his life that this darkling sheathed. Before, a full flood of light at the window. Now, veering of pale moles. —This is twilight. He caught his mind and made it judge the sweet still pleasure it had just floated toward: the unreal Janet brought near where his true wife was distant, the broken particles of thought clustered about a breaking life.—Already so far dwindled? Already the mere fragments of sensation had a glow for him as once their mastered unity? He had embraced these pale vagaries of his mind as once he might have some full bodily possession.

He saw a man. He is gaunt . . grown meatless, sinewless: he is a skeleton . . he is dust. At each state he is hazed about by a sufficing atmosphere made of his own exhalations. He smiled. —I am already satisfied with splinters of reality, with shafts of shadow. For I make them up, I am splintered also! . . . These then were tokens of himself. But here were only terms . . terms borrowed from a different life. Vague he called them, but in any true way were they abstract or diminutions? The skeleton was horrid only to the man with flesh about his bones.

Steele's words came alive to him. To doubt that this new atmosphere was a dwindling . . to

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equal the skeleton's miasma with the breath of living man . . . was indeed a flaw in his Empiricism. How soon he had touched a weakness in his health-propped Creed, now he was gripped in sickness!

But the flaw healed. Janet was there with the broth. He knew again the resistless difference between the packed throb of life—all that had been—and these ghost-shivers winging through him as a cloud's shadow scuds through water. He took the hot cup from her into his hands. The faint tricks died that his faint life, yearning to be real, had played on him. Janet was no nearer. But death was. And since this was the Truth. . .

8

Lathran lay under his smoothed covers; his wife spoke.

The dawn had come upon the night like pallor and coldness and dying on a face. He had fallen asleep. His consciousness flared through the dark, colorful and strong, and then it too grew infirm: and its parts flew, a mad maze, into each other. This was his sleep. But now he lay awake. And the sun made of the room an altogether separate being from the dawn which he had felt as the night's death.

The day was a young body bursting in. The day advanced. And he within it disappearing. This was the quality that made him new: that each

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time caught him up and flung him off from what he was when he forgot.

Under it all was the wash of his wife's words, moving with promise of his recovery. Their tender monotone made it hard for his mind not to slip away. And the direction of his lapse from hearing her was toward just this contrast filling the room: the day's room and his own waning within it. With her there and the light, how clear that he was dying!

"Why does Doctor Steele stay away?" Janet asked.

"There is no need for him to come."

Her eyes showed her strained in an emotional deadlock as she heard this. —What does he mean? His words say good news. Still, weakly, feverishly, you are there. The joyous clang they should have is not there. Lack falsifies words that are there.

"What do you mean, Fred?"

He sees the designless ceiling. He is very calm. And she is very far away. —I will send words upward, straight, impervious. At my side is Janet, aside from my words and myself who see a designless ceiling.

"There is no need of his coming, because he cannot help me. It is all over. . . That is nonsense. . . What I mean——" She lurched forward, a body caught in an electric current. "Nonsense" cut the force, setting her afire. She crumpled back, the hope so full in her that although Lathran

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dwelt with the designless ceiling, like a flame by his side she burned against his world.

"What I mean is not that *it* is all over. What I mean is that *my life*——." Janet standing. A film of some impregnable element stood also there, between them. Lathran floated away. A sea of broken thoughts lapped about him. He was cradled in it. He was at rest. . . He remembered his wife. Her hand held his. Her face was before his eyes.

—She knows! Sad face. All the firm world's anguish within it. The sweet and buoyant sea was gone. He was in chaos once more . . sinking.

4

She tried never to be away from him. It seemed to her all that she could do.

He knew that she had been to Steele. For she came back, bloodless and old, at noon. Since then she had not left him. —She has resolved to be brave! Her eyes were the most curiously changed. They were no longer steadfast save when they looked away. And when they met his gaze, they were full of panic and retreat. Almost, they were full of guilt. They dared not look for his. A common knowledge, there in the room, threatening to enchain her eyes like naked things before a Judgment. They were afraid of a truth. Always before they had been warm in a truth. Lathran knew that his last perfect meeting with his wife's eyes was past.

Lathran discovered that he was unhappy.

This was remarkable for him and without precedent. He had lived too fully in the acceptance of what he was, of what life was, of what he could do in life, to be unhappy. When he learned that he was going to die, acceptance rang on. Even then he was not unhappy. Now it was different. He asked himself the cause. He was amazed to feel that in so asking, his thoughts veered from the matter of his death. Death seemed beyond the reason why he was unhappy.

Was this because he could not . . . dared not . . . really dwell upon what death was? There was an answer for this. —Death is the stopping of all things for me. His unhappiness was of the present. With death it too will cease. It, then, was not the cause. He could face that future. He could not find it in him to resist effacement. Too gradually the process worked. Too fully were his senses and his spirit drenched with the tendency of death. To die was the natural thing. This could not cause his restlessness. What then? Was it that he still *lived*, with his soul forged beyond and already at the gates of the Conclusion? lived with his body amorous for annihilation? Was it that a part of him lagged? . . .

Janet reads to him.

Her lithe true body! Words move her mouth and make her breast sway faintly. A tense strain

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wrapped her up. A lovely living thing. —She has been my bread and my wine. Her voice has been my spirit. He knew how in those eyes had lived understanding of himself. —I ponder the reason of my unhappiness. I look at Janet!

Knowledge flicked against the raw of his feeling. All he was ready to swing on . . . to the End. —Janet holds part of me back! The pull hurts. The pull broke the monotone of dying.

Looking at her meant to linger. Lathran tried to remember something. The tendrils of a past experience waved like a scarf before him. He wanted to finger it, pursue it. He wanted what it meant. He knew no more about it. Then, here it is! His mind was clear and cold while Janet read. This thought brought him nearer what he reached for. The old broken-lights, the hinterland of graded dissolutions, shimmer of tone and color whose reality he had condemned as a flaw in his Empiricism and whose glow was warm for him to lie in, move through: here were the objects of his search. With his mind clear and cold these were gone. He had not for some time been in them. Now he knew why. Janet reads!

These could not live in his wife's presence. Her strong light dispelled them. And she was with him always. And he was longing for these things.

He believed he understood what his mind hinted. These were the true ways now: true exhalations of what he had become. Janet was of the past. She drew him back from the inevitable, she turned his

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nerves from their direction. This hurt. The need of dying sent out its call against her.

—But this is what I want! cold calm facing of what must be. He had rebelled that his mind rot with his body. What were these ghosts of sense but the fumes of rotting?

—Was I wrong? For the first time he was unhappy. And when Janet was there . . . always, always . . . she was a stranger. Only when she was gone and the ghosts of sense crept up did she come near him. Another Janet. Her stuff took on the nature of his stuff. . . . Janet of breaking fading particles to merge in his. That Janet died along. The real Janet was hard and stubborn . . . so loving, so loving wrong . . . against the need of his slumberous self. She stood out, alien, like a brilliant pigment thrust in a cloudy canvas. She broke up the melope of the rest of the picture.

Judgment stood sheer. Sweet and deep-breathed, fertile-living, Janet was false to what his life had shrunk to. He had passed even from denying that. But a strain still lived in him against what had become, must be, his state. And of this strain, Janet was the way.

—I can see her. I see you. The moist beauty of your moving lips, the soft warm breathing breasts, how gayly firm, how bright! Whole young body moist as with a dew of morning. And I am dry. He felt the blade of her spirit sheer like young grass.—What is all this to me? That he

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saw also: the agony of her attempt, since she loved him living, to embrace his death: the sear, marring her fairness, of her folly.—Relic of me with fullness of you? Reaches of life between them.

Lathran was in chaos. Two forces flung him. Sinking autumn and high spring. Each barred the full of the other. Chaos. . . Janet reads.

6

She comes into the room. He knew now what came with her. The process was already old and constant. His trained mind gauged it with keen fear. His trained mind found a term for it.

When she was there, he is once more *fleshed*. That was it. When she left him, he was volatile and attuned to the death that hailed him. As he flowed toward it now, already he grew rather than dwindled. The balance of measure was already against Flesh, was for the End. Yet the flesh was heavy, it turned against its end, it made him feel misery in his own. —My end merely a little sooner than the end of my flesh. His learning seemed to have missed knowledge of just how long after he was gone, his hands and his face and all his flesh would follow.

Against such thoughts, Janet comes into the room: upon such dwellers in him she leans down: she kisses him: her breasts like flowers stand upon his drouth.

He was comfortable in bed. The day was grey.

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He saw the snow swirl in blue skeins outside his window. All the day was a pale peace. It was cloaked and warm. The light spread through the day in myriad veins. And in it, his mind lay also cloaked and softly broken up.

A little cloud of flakes, caught in the haven of his window, danced free of the heavy drive of the storm. No wind drove them. The disparate splinters of the wind whiffed them here, there, idly. When a flake touched the warmed pane, it died.

His mood was lulled. Beyond brooded sky, grey and without movement and without feeling. More close was the lazy play of the harbored snowflakes. Between, the storm drove steadfast. He lost his sense of being separate. He merged in the monotone. He loved it.

Janet was there. He saw that something had intruded upon the constant wither of her sorrow. She had a yellow paper in her hand . . . a telegram.

—From the world of storm comes a long thrust upon us . . . upon my misty room. Through Janet, through her hand, sparking, the fire of the outer world like that paper in her hand, upon my mist.

“Dearest, my sister . . . this telegram says her baby will be born, any hour now. You know she always needs me.”

—New life in the world, sparking in the hand and mouth of Janet, against my slumber. “Of course, Janet. You must go.”

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She breathed hard. —How can I? . . . She sank in a chair. And she sobbed.

—Your tears, too, are life sparking through yours eyes. Eyes, mouth, hand . . all of you sparking life. “Go, Dear.”

She got up. Lathran knew then how very strong she was. He knew the reason of her strength when giving way had been good. It was her knowledge that he was weak . . and that life was elsewhere.

Master, she came to his bed. Her hair was a bewilderment of life in his limp arms. Its acerb perfume cut his senses. There she lay while her sorrow waved over her and wracked him . . left her whole.

He saw how stiff and broken was her step to the door. He saw the strained draw of her shoulder . . the curl of her fingers within her palms. She did not turn back—drawing away toward Life.

7

—I am going to be alone!

Alone. . .

—Is it fair of me to long to be alone?

8

There was a great Darkness, low like a sea, outside. A stroke of light from the sea transfixed him. The sea came up. His being said:

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"I am going to die."

It was a different saying. It made him know that it was the first real knowing. All of him shared this. It wrapped him up, it welled within him. He was aware that soon it would be he. That which was other than himself it dimmed, or it drenched to the same element. The stroke of light whereby he had known went out. It shattered into innumerable lucent lives. And these remained. They were everywhere. They gave a soul to the darkness. They were the spirit of his thinking. They were to be his thoughts, running through what he was, as the light-splinters ran through the black.

His being had become: "I am going to die."

He had never dwelt with it in this true way before.

—*I am alone!* His thoughts had swirled and thinned ubiquitous, avoiding the central force that drove them. The word "I am going to die" had fallen in him. And his scared life had scattered from the word. Tinged with it all his thoughts had been, but only from the impact driving them off.

"I am going to die." Now all. Now different. A lull like the slumbering together of kindred creatures come from afar. And this light-breathed darkness was more clear than all the days he had known. His mind swung through it, unafraid, unhampered.

All these years he had groped in the sun. The

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sun was not his home. He had not sprung from the sun. The sun was interlude. These womb-mists, shot with light, were warmer. In a way vastly deep they were familiar. In a way infinitely old, he rested in them. The darkness was now everywhere, like a sea. Above he saw the filming wave of the sea's surface. All he was bathed in it. And the splintered light made it a sweet thing to lie in.

—My work is over. He would never work again. "What is work," he said rejoicing, "but a man's response to pain?" And he without pain. The hurt of his body was the last echo of a lost word. It went with the sun . . pain and sun . . whose interlude was played. It was no thing.

. . Why did he lose the sense of his body and of his hands, and of all the mumbled catchwords with which men beguile themselves into a sort of order? Why did it seem to him that he is very simple, very small . . that he lies clustered in eternity and that the vastest gesture of all the world is this one, rocking him to sleep?

9

Janet is there. Sun and Janet is there. He leaving Janet and sun.

But as he tossed in his chaos, looking at her, looking at the sun, a new element came in. He had tasted absolution from this turmoil. A way

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to retrieve it, to hold the absolution moved into his reach.

She is at the window. The dullness of the day creates and yields to her brightness. Without her the dull day would be singing his mood.

But he could drive her away! He could forbid her the room. He could achieve his world of exhalations.

"I want to be alone—with my dying."

He would need to say no more. Janet would not question. Simply she would obey. With the words on his lips, he saw already the gentle falling of her eyelids as she stands there receiving his desire and goes.

Goes! —I am alone!

Could he not do this? Was it not his right? —It is I who am dying!

"Janet," he called.

She came silent. She sank to her knees and only her hair was visible above the bed. Like smoke . . like the smoke perfume of a Sacrifice!

Lathran's dilemma was clear to him. If she remained, so will his agony. The other way meant Janet's. The wound of his dismissing her will be his legacy. It will be a blight that will outlast him. It will become the refrain of all her memory and of her love. But from his side——? —If I shut her out, I slide sweetly into death. . .

She remained ministering to him: sure of her love and therefore sure that her presence was a needful, pitiful thing. Until he died, he would have air, he would have her. No difference.

No respite . . no sustainment as he went save the ironic knowledge that he might have gone in peace. She sits with him, doing little things, omniscient of his vaguest needs . . of all needs save the one Need that she go. —Cannot you see, smouldered within his eyes; it is not I you love? I have gone . . that you mock *this*, with your love for *that*? But she did not see. Sometimes she talked. Sometimes she read. More and more, simply she sits beside his bed.

Her dresses were still gay . . May colors he had loved and chosen for her body. This, with his quivering sense, he understood. He knew the black dress would come. For Janet's mourning was a flower not yet blooming. Its blossom he would not be there to see. But all of its sad fragrance the bud held tightly.

Her sorrow was fair, serenely growing: it was fair to see. When the bud was ready to burst he would have to go. Almost it was as if the budding of her grief was the primal thing, the moving. He looked with joy on her young fair grief that grew with his fading away.

To cast her out would be to pluck apart the fragile reluctance of that flower . . to violate its way into life.

Why could he not be sure of the earth of her desire to be there, of the spirit of his desire to be alone?

11

Looking upon her grief, looking upon his contemplated act he found: —I am glad that I love her. I am glad that I love her better than she me, for she is fooled, loving a half dead thing. He began to feel that his love was more precious, surely more rare, than the sweet falling into death her presence marred. With his fingers touching her eyes . . they dared again . . he caught a life frail as what he touched, yet too strong to lean upon a future, too deep to have dimension beyond itself.

He was not solving his dilemma. He suffered. Much of the time, he was torn and mangled between here and there. Yet in a way marvelously veiled, he learned. —I am learning? What is there to learn? . . . Beyond the slope of dying was there a peak of life?

12

Always he had not asked Janet to leave him.

He stormed against his weakness, he fought with this holding sentiment of life, while his death filled the room. He called it false.

—False as her love for what I have become! What if truth breaks her heart? Should he have expended all his days dabbling with counterfeits, only to deny reality at the end? Since it was truth that needed solitude and her wish that shut it out, let her heart break! Surely the silent way along which his dying led with all of him apace was the

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true way. What could equal that? Merely a fact: she stays.

He called it Sacrifice. He became glad of it. He ruled that his wife's false peace be better than his quest. He would die agonized and estranged from truth in order that she might live with a memory. Here surely was a perfect immolation of which she must know nothing. Lest it be marred. He put himself in tune with it. . . Then he laughed at the word Sacrifice and knew it for a lie. —What truth does it cover?

'All of his swing to the Conclusion he put aside. He still believed in the finality of the mists that came to escort him when she was away. But of them and of the peace they brought he made his abdication. Janet should have her sentiment to salve her loss.

He was flowing into the Mystery with his nerves janglingly shut to its significance. —What truth does the lie cover? . . . A man lives once, and once meets death. His had been the chance to know the Course, to hold his senses open to the way of the Passage. And where he went love and pity and comradeship did not exist. Already in the shadow of the new Realm he should have cast them out. With his wife beyond the door of his room, they also might have been excluded . . . discards of life past meaning for him. But he chose other. The shred of human sentiment that clung in the grain of his dying was to falsify the rest. Janet would stay. And all the ineffable Design made

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by his dying and death, made by his dissolution from the world, was to be ash on the world's altar.

ENVOI

A slow Dawn. . .

A fire flared forth with sweet ravagement and made a note of all that it encountered. No longer the drone in his ears:—I have lived; nor the sharp word:—I die. The little flame went forth (was it the truth that the lie, Sacrifice, had hidden?) It went forth. And he in the slow and in the quick of it, in the dirge and in the dance of it. The flame was but the will of him. He but the way of it. His hands within it touching the hands of another, touching the hands of Janet. And all they touched glowed, blest, in the weave of the flame that the lie, Sacrifice, had hidden. . .

He took nothing of Janet. He gave her nothing. The moment of them both together was the flame. And its light was without Time, and its burning was all things. He was burned free of needs and appetites. He was mindless of past, fearless and needless of future. The beat of his life was unisoned with all he encountered.

Then, he encountered all. . .

TWELVE
JOURNEY'S END

THE little man passed John Dawson. Dawson leaned against the brownstone stoop, one leg across the other so that the toe . . he wore tan brogans . . gracefully tipped the sidewalk beside the other shoe.

—Little man . . scarcely my shoulder.

The woman whom also he noticed often, from the opposite direction passed him too. She walked deliberate, suave. Her face was grey, the paint on her cheeks absurd against her eyes with their glow.

—Little too. Not to my shoulder, she. . . I look up to them both!

His two feet stood square. —I can't follow the woman. Well, the man. . .

He saw him through the intricate thrusting mass of urgent black bodies, wan faces, beyond: little man bobbing, half-trotting, swaying in a dimension out of his steady progress. Dawson strode nearer. Grey hair in a too small slouch hat . . the sway of the little man ate into his sodden measure. —I am beginning to feel you. "I'm beginning," he said aloud, "to know why I look up to you, think of you nights, man, swaying along! By God, you're dreaming. You've a concrete Dream." —Where is mine?

—I can't walk in stride with him. Dawson

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stumbled and laughed. They were at the corner of the Block. The little man stopped: swaying more sharply, his face went up against the hoot of an Elevated train. He quailed. Dawson saw his hands curl in pain.

He stepped up and faced him. Another train pounded from the opposite direction.

"Trains run over it, eh?" he shouted. "Trains made of steel kill it, eh?" . . . The trains passed. In the silence of less noise, the duller usual lay upon the street of horse-hoof, foot-thresh: —Am I mad? But the little man nodded. "Not kill . . not kill," very quietly he said. "Not so bad as that. But you're right."

Dawson's mouth opened. He looked at this partner of strangeness.

A slight hand, held imperiously up, barred him: "Don't say any more. In the hurt of that train I lost my hold on something which you glimpsed. Don't say any more, sir. You can't. These accidents take place."

Dawson breathed hard. He felt himself to the degree that self was palpable. Dimensionally clear the lines of his own life lay upon his eyes. —I am a strong body. I am a mind sick with its sensitivity within me. I have said: "Body, you're right" and I have chosen this . . this muffling life of work on stone and on wood, of sweat, of the good drunkenness of tired muscles. For this? What is this?

Came the high fine voice: "We live on the same

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Block. You have seen me walking. Afternoons, evenings. After school hours. You have been able to glimpse who walks beside me!"

"Concrete," said Dawson.

"Loveliness. . ."

A pause. The little man watched dimly, then searched half away. "There are tears in your eyes," he said not looking at him.

"My dream is not concrete. There aren't tears . . . never!"

"You will weep some day." Dawson felt: —What do I know of myself? "Then you can see the tears in the eyes of others. . . Better for you, than seeing My Dora." He blinked, looking away again from this looming obtruding man.

He stood there a white wisp. His grey hair, free under the too small hat, waved in the wind. His hands waved in a thought. It seemed to lift him along.

.

A girl came down dark stairs of a flat. As her hand went out for the door, it opened from her. She stepped to the light, a man was going up. At her slender shoulders, tugging her back, was the musty shadow of the hall. Upon her face the street, full of the mellowed light of late afternoon, and this man.

She smiled at him. Her smile cut through some sweet preoccupation in his eyes: he smiled back curtly.

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"Good evening, Mr Rudd."

"Oh, good evening." He shut the door behind him.

She stood on the stoop alone.—I am twenty-four. She felt the grey skirt clinging to her hips, the thick waist clinging to her shoulders. She felt her shoulders free but the grey of her clothes she felt clung to her face, bound her head and her brow. Her neck was long, ivory-tinged. Her head poised with beauty, faintly tilted back as if the mass of chestnut hair were weight. Darkly it rose from the brow, golden it fell to the nape. Her eyes, large, blue quiet eyes, lay wandering upon the street, right and left, taking in nothing.

She sighed. She sat on the stoop. —I am tired. With an oblivious hand she stroked the bare other arm: thin, gold-downed, faintly perspiring. —Hot. Peter'll not be back for supper. Sure. These June nights! Dear old Peter . . you need other company than Sister, eh? Don't blame you.

Upstairs the quiet carpenter man, Mr Rudd:— is he kissing his wife? are they at table with Andy and Jack, the lads? Not yet. They're in the bedroom. Supper can wait on the stove. His arms, all strong with their reddish hair gleaming from the scrub he's given them, are about her waist. How they love each other! Something is wrong. What is it? You are jealous. You are a little in love with Mr Rudd. No I'm not. Something is wrong up there. I want to help you. Yes, I do. I want you two to be happy. . . You two seem

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happier than anyone else I know. I want you really . . I want you really . . . ! What is wrong? I am afraid for you. . . He and she never give me a chance to speak to them. So stuck up. So in love with themselves and each other. Is that it? . . . If I could know——.

She saw John Dawson coming up the street. —I think of them at nights and that's not right. They belong to each other. Just below my room. Rudd, reddish white in the black, holding the body of her. That's not right! She looked at John Dawson.

"Hello." He came up the stoop.

Dawson nodded and sat beside the girl. She mopped her brow.

"Hot, eh?"

"Yes," he answered.

He was not looking at her.—Down at the corner, what has happened to me?

—Mad man! Well you too then, you joined in. Madness can be concrete. Solider . . solider than what? He lifted his face, searching a something solider than madness. He saw the girl—Jane McDermott. He stretched out his hands and looked at them. Large, bland palms, little-lined: fingers twisted with heavy tufts of hair. —Empty hands. Bah! The palms that hold . . are empty. The fingers have moved much. They're worn with it, twisted with moving. What have they put in the palms? He looked at the girl again. She was unobtrusive upon him. —He teaches school.

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Mad! Every afternoon and evening he walks with a dame of Loveliness called Dora. Lucky kids. Wish I was one of them. I had no teacher like that. Well, I'm mad too. Look at your talk. *Look at me now!*

With an effort, seeing the girl within his world of strangeness, Dawson spoke: "We haven't got much to say to each other today."

"Why should we?"

"Why should we not? We live in the same house."

"What's that?"

"Well, we live in the same world. Some of the same things must happen to us both."

"Yes."

"Why can't we talk about them?"

"You begin."

"Will you follow?"

"If I can."

"I don't know how to begin." He sulked like a child.

"I'll begin for you . . . just once. You're funny to-day. Something has happened to you. Something that stirred you all up."

"You know what's happened to me, Jane?" She flushed at her name, her eyes hardened. "A most mysterious thing. A terrible thing. I found myself in the world."

The girl's eyes startled, then softened in acquiescence. She accepted his words.—Go on! Queer

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long words. Funny mechanic, you. Go on, though.

John Dawson was silent.

Both of them were silent. They sat there, opposite each other on the stoop, confronted, apart. Their eyes did not meet. They felt each other's eyes not going out to meet. Men, women, passed between them going up and down the house that stood above them very high. Its largeness was made of myriad little questions. . . Their eyes, forced back from meeting, each, the silent life of the other, went within. Jane McDermott, the man—*You are not John Dawson now!* . . . searched in themselves with their retreating eyes.

Moments of ruminant darkness. Their minds gave no light from their inner search of themselves. Sudden their eyes, sated from within, and expelled, energized so, came forth: stood nervous, tense, passionate to each other.

Dawson said: "Come with me for a walk."

Like one, they got up.

"Are you busy?" He spoke panting, she heard this. "Have you hours? I want hours of you, Jane . . . at once! Are you free . . . hours?"

At the end of the street, broken into several Blocks as at the end of a telescopic funnel, lay the Park. It had folds of green, gentle and virginal in June, that lay upon the mole above the River.

The man and the girl felt the Park before they saw it. They turned their faces toward it and their backs upon a round red sun. It bled upon

City Block

blackness and grey. They cast it off with their hurry.

They walked very fast. He was tall, he had long legs and a swinging stride. She tried to keep step, she could not. In the effort her body, tall too and lithe, broke gently at the waist into a boyish awkwardness of strain. Her elbows pointed back of her slight hips and her head pressed forward.

They stopped. "Should we sit here?"

They sat in the grass. Above them beyond the iron grille, the walks slashed up. Few women and children were at the benches so that the walk was light. The lawn fell fast to the River. The water churned, slipping away between the City and the Island with its hospitals. It flung along with it tug-boats, barges, that danced with the rapid current against their own sedateness: a few chugged with heavy feet against the stream. The day dimmed fast. Lights streaked against the greying blondness of the day like strains of grey in the fair hair of a woman.

"I'm going to take your challenge," the man sat at ease on the lawn, "I am going to talk about myself. You said for me to begin. I don't know if you'll follow me or not. I'm doing this for myself . . . not for you . . . not to interest you. For myself. Perhaps to interest myself. I don't know very much about why I am talking. All I know is, it has nothing to do with you." He turned to her. "That's a beginning at least, of knowing

City Block

something—" he drawled the last two words, then he stopped. "I take that back. I don't know even that. If it's because of you . . or not."

"Don't begin," she said.

"It's too late, now."

He saw the pulse of her throat . . heart heart . . vividder than her words. He saw a veil come over the flash of her eyes.

"What is your name?" she said.

He felt no surprise. "What difference? . . so long as you have guessed it isn't Dawson."

"Yes."

"Evans . . Lathrop Evans: native of Chicago. C. E.—that's Civil Engineer, Graduate of Ann Arbor . . if you want to know. Married, divorced. My wife preferred Chicago to the Construction Camps. . . Brilliant career building roads and dams in Wyoming, Idaho, Montana—now forgotten already. Hard drinker—now sober, forever. Good cool head, good Boss, good theorist too,—and today I don't know if I am mad or not."

He looked at her now as he spoke, leaning his body toward her.

"Look here, I am brilliant and you are not. I don't say I have a better man's mind than you a woman's. But mine's trained, yours isn't. Mine is nourished with experience of men and women and life: yours is not. I am a danger to you, Jane. You can't cope with me. I'll bowl you over. But you can run away?"

Her eyes met his, they were flat against his ques-

City Block

tion like a lawn of young blue grass . . . inviting.

"In chatting with you, already I've turned up some things about myself I didn't know. I'm lonely. It's over a year since I lit out from the West . . . over a year alone. And I'm hungry. And I'm after you. That's the reason for this. You see, when I said before you had nothing to do with my talking I fooled myself. It's a habit of my blood you Irish haven't got. You're one-minded; we aren't. That's why we always win against you . . . and always envy you, somehow, your defeat. For the fifteen months I've been alone, not touching a woman, not touching whiskey, I've barred myself even from knowing that I was hungry and thirsty. That's how I managed it . . . a cheating way you haven't got. Today I meet a mild madman who takes walks with an invisible Queen whom he calls Dora. And in his satisfaction my wants wave over me. Do you wish to get away, Jane McDermott, back to your brother whom you care for so and who finds it so damned convenient to be cared for by you? Go now. This volume of words is meant to seduce you. You know that word. There are you, here am I. I'm building a Bridge between us. You've never known any one before who could build a Bridge . . . who could use words like me. Your folks are dumb . . . except when they sing and are drunk. Song and drunken dance have power against children. Words . . . bridge-building words have power against men. And you're not a man.

City Block

You're a child . . with a skin like the white of a peach. I am building a Bridge into you . . under your clothes into *you*. . ." He stopped.

When he spoke again, his voice was clouded and slow.

"Should I go on?"

Her eyes were there . . their blue was green like a lawn. Not now like a lawn. Still green in the blue twilight, they were smaller, sharper; they met the eyes of the man.

They were breathing together. They sat very close. They were alone. They did not notice each other, but they were breathing together.

The strain of their union grew. A tremor ran through them, and the man could not bear it. The strain broke. There they sat, side by side on the darkling grass above the running River. They sat there mellow. There was no strain between them.

Dawson knew what this was that had come to be between them. . . He marvelled more than she, because he knew.

He took her hand, he had not touched her before: now he held her hand tenderly within his two large palms.

"You are Loveliness," he said. "And I see you."

She murmured a sound: "I feel you."

He wanted to feel her. He pressed her hand and it was only a hand with all of a hand's defining character. He dropped it. His own hands went

City Block

to his face. He saw through his fingers the River running in a passionate silence.

—What have I done now? what now? Beside him sat this girl who was his. —She is mine . . what is that?

He was afraid to look at her. He did not like the sureness of the River. He shut his eyes.

He saw his Resolution: "Bridges . . rough men . . virgin desert lands . . shall be ghosts. I want something concrete, something real. The real is the lovely." . . The mad little man also used that word. Had he come to New York, earning his bread stupidly with his hands, flinging his mind and his science and his prestige into the discard, to see *him*, to surprise the dream of a little man, to see Jane? . . .

He sat below her on the sloping lawn and he saw her. Dark and tall she was, marvelously sure against the smoky sky of the young night. She rose like a little tree from the earth where they sat, his hands touched her knees. From the earth rose her body and his vision of her. He knew within that simple mark of her against blind sky, what there was he could touch: hair, eyes, her mouth, her throat, her arms, her breast.

—What there is of her, I can touch!

He did not see that she was crying.

2

Jane knocked, opened without waiting, laughed into the room. Dawson lay on his bed. "Hello."

City Block

He stretched out his arms, otherwise did not move. She entered them and kissed him with quick tenderness. She sat on the chair beside him.

"Why do you laugh?" he said.

"It's so funny."

"What?"

"You've had this nice room and yourself in it, so many months, and until seventeen days ago I never had the sense to come in."

"You weren't invited."

"Would you have thrown me out?"

"Most certainly."

She laughed again.

"You're happy, Jane?"

"Don't make me think, man!"

"I don't laugh half so much as you do, Jane."

"Why should you?"

"It's I got what I wanted, getting you."

"Who knows? . . . Why do you like my horrid grey old clothes? why now won't you let me change?"

"I got to know you in them. They were a symbol for me when first I got to know you. You don't understand? I knew then just as well as now what a soft white subtle skin you had, you woman! I said to myself: If she wears coarse grey wool over that, she'll take me too. That skirt and that waist . . in Spring, and lots of light things cost less . . clinging to your flesh, protecting it, denying it almost, made me think of *me*.

City Block

I too was a coarse heavy stuff surrounding and covering you, Jane."

"John——"

"Yes; but answer me something first. Why do you call me John?"

"John's your name."

"Not . . the other?"

"John's your name!"

He chuckled. "What were you going to say?"

"That you're wrong, John. You don't cover me."

He sat up in his bed. The soft collar of his open shirt, pushed back, revealed hard sinews digging into the chest like roots of a tree. His feet were bare. Narrow long feet, strangely white beneath the torn fringe of his trowsers, against the glow of his face.

"You're not laughing now, Jane. When you say, I don't cover you, you stop your smile. That shows you want me to."

"I don't know. I never wanted anything in the world."

"Jane, what is it you want?"

She looked at him with eyes larger and more blue. Vaguely her hand moved toward his, and vaguely away.

"What is it, John?"

"Have I done wrong loving you, taking you?"

She smiled and shook her head. "You haven't taken me. You haven't loved me."

City Block

He was pale. Her words struck him helpless against them.

"Jane, what do any of us know?"

She saw him suffer. So she took his face in her hands. She kissed his eyes, his hair, rumpling it gently. She kissed his throat and his mouth. She looked long at his brow. She won her way into his arms, enfevering him with her deliberate warmth: subtly at work against the strain and pain of his questioning brow. She did not kiss his brow until his body forgot.

In a release they lay on his bed. His brow locked once more. There was his brow above them. His hand followed the clear line of her body . . . loose tremulous intaking hand at war against his brow. His eyes looked upward following what his hand gave him to feel. But there was conflict. His eyes ached. His hands felt no more.

Her flesh shrank against a hand that touching her had no eyes and no mind along. She suffered in his bed. She took his hand and placed it like a child's on the sheet beside her.

"Why don't I cover you, Jane?"

"You ask so many questions!"

"You ask so few! I wish you'd ask me more. Not a question about myself!"

"Didn't you tell me?"

"Precious little . . . that first afternoon. How many days ago?"

"Seventeen days——"

"Not a question since."

City Block

"But John, you know so little yourself. Wise boy . . you couldn't tell me anything. . . You come from a swell family in Chicago——"

"Not swell at all. My father owned a hardware store on the North Side. He died leaving my mother \$1200 a year."

"He sent you to College——"

"Just see how little you know! I worked my way through. I waited on a table. I did odd electrical jobs . . plumbing . . anything. Summers I made good money playing baseball."

"It doesn't matter a bit. *You* are swell. You are smart. You got done with College and began making lots of money bossing other men. Then you married a swell girl—stuck-up girl. And you didn't have any babies, and you got unhappy—and drunk. And a big job came from some other State where there are high mountains and rivers and everything . . just the opposite of Chicago I guess: I know where it is on the Map even if I don't know the name. And away you went mad, without kissing your wife goodbye. And you made more money. And because you were mad when you left her and didn't kiss her, and did her dirt,—it wasn't her fault she was born swell any more than yours, or mine that I ain't—just because of that you hated her, and told her to divorce you. She'd never have done it first. Women don't sin that way with a man like you. And you went on sinning . . and sinning——"

"Divorce is a sin?"

City Block

"Yes. Double. The marriage that ends in divorce is the first sin and the divorce is the last. You went on sinning in the mountains just as you had in the city——"

"How?"

"Gloomy . . being gloomy. Cursing. Never forgetting yourself. Being gloomy, mostly. What a sin!" Jane laughed. "And so at last you got tired of being sinful in the mountains just as you had of being sinful in the city. So you came back to the city. . ."

"Another city."

"Of course." She leaned over him. Her breasts pointed above the tangled hair of his chest. So suspended, she looked at him and laughed. "Well, don't I know about you? More than *you* know. You can't add a thing."

His arms went over her, but he did not bring her nearer.

"You don't make me ashamed of myself. Not a bit. Do you hear?"

Then she kissed his brow . . and jumped up. They dressed.

"Sit down," he said. She sat down. "Now, let's get at this."

He paced the little room, gathering words. She folded her hands in her lap and with her head up-tilted followed him pacing the room.

He stopped, faced her, feet planted wide. "There are women like you. Yes, there must be women like you. You don't know a thing. A

City Block

man like myself is an unheard-of mystery to you, to everyone you know . . . to your Priest, to your friends, to your meteoric little chap of a brother who can't hold his drink. Yet you're inside of me . . . deep. Your eyes and your fingers touch every part of my soul. It's not my words you know . . . it's not my thoughts. It's me."

He sat at her feet. She looked straight now from her delicate round face to his . . . long, worn: a boy's brown eyes in the face of a man who had worn life roughly. His face was near. In the ill-focus of her far-sighted eyes, Jane saw the triangular design of his face with base at the brow and fine point at the chin. She closed her eyes.

"I'm not a person, Jane. That's the truth about me. That's why Evans slipped so quickly into Dawson. That's also why the Deer Sook Dam got built so quick and so well. Dams and bridges and roads across alluvial plains . . . that's easy enough. One needs a mechanical head and a mechanical nerve for that. And getting women with open hearts like you . . . like my wife: that's easy too. Just a good body and a hopeless hunger is all you've got to have for that. But being a *person*——"

She clasped his brow and smoothed it with her fingers. "Don't wrinkle your forehead. That won't help. That only blinds you——"

"—Blinds me?"

"You're as blind as a puppy. Haven't you ever

City Block

noticed how wrinkled up their faces are? and a baby's too. They can't see a thing."

"I can see that you are lovely. There *are* women like you." He drew up a chair and sat beside her. "Why don't I cover you, Jane?"

His pride was hurt. —The little man with his crazy dream . . . the little woman with the painted cheeks . . . this girl who came the moment I told her to . . . give me shame, hurt my pride! It hurts. He looked at her since she did not answer his question. —Ignorant Catholic girl. A lovely body. Mother sense hungering, that's all. It gets you!

"You go to Church don't you," he asked.

"I haven't for three weeks."

"Why not, Jane?"

"I'm not ready yet, John dear, to tell my Confessor about you."

"You're afraid——"

"I'm not! I'm not ready for his advice. I know what it'll be."

"And you'll obey it?"

"When I hear it, yes."

—Shame, shame! These persons toss me about. He was bruised with their tossing. He stretched out his arms and saw that they were strong.

"It's not the Church that keeps me from covering you?"

"The Church!" Jane laughed.

"Is it Peter?"

"My brother?" she startled and her smile was gone.

City Block

"Well, why not your brother?" —I do not want to be shamed! "You love him, don't you? Are you so wise you know the difference between loves?"

"If you went to Church, you educated monster, you'd know too."

He was again at her feet on the floor. She placed his head in her lap.

"I don't know a thing, I admit. Jane, tell me about your brother."

"What is there to tell? You know him. He's wild and good . . a regular man. I take care of him and he takes care of me. He's very religious and Saturday nights he gets drunk. You've seen him often."

"Jane, who is it that keeps me from covering you?"

She stroked his hair. Looking away she stroked.

"Tell me your thoughts," he said, his face close in the thick wool of her lap, feeling beneath the skirt her self . . serene, undefending. "I want to know why I can't feel you even now, when my face is in your lap, close on your body . . your body that has been mine!"

She stroked.

"Jane! What are you thinking about?"

She looked down at him, her hand stroking. "What am I thinking about? O about something that's nothing to you . . that has nothing to do with us . . about someone."

"Who?" He lifted his face.

City Block

"O, a man you don't know. He just came into my mind."

"Who?"

"His name is Mr Rudd."

"Rudd! The carpenter who lives down below you with a wife and two kids?"

"Yes."

"Why of Rudd?"

"Why not?"

"Jane, tell me. Is there anything between you and *him*?"

"I've never said more to him than How-do-you-do."

"Why Rudd then——"

"You wanted to know, John, what I was thinking of, that moment. Well, I told you."

He was quiet. He laid his head once more in her lap and her hand fell to stroking his hair.

"Go ahead," he said. "What were you thinking about Rudd?"

"Crazy thoughts——"

"Perhaps all thoughts are crazy."

"Well, I'll tell you. But don't break in, the way you usually do. Everybody can't reel off his thoughts like you can."

He was still under the stroke of her hand. Measuredly it brought new calm between them.

"I don't know. I've never said anything to him but hello nor he to me. And not that to the Missus. I don't know where she does her marketing. But I seem to sort of know they're very happy

City Block

together. And it frightens me, because they're afraid because they're happy together. Why don't they ever laugh? I don't know of course if they do: how should I know? But they don't. Peter and me and them've been living in this flat for years. I've seen and seen them. They are happy and they never laugh. . . So I'm afraid. What business is it of mine? Well, I don't know. He's such a sweet boyish man . . so proud and so gentle-like. Always his head up high. What'd happen if something happened? Things always do! I feel nothin's happened to him. I'm afraid, for when it does." She paused. The strokes of her hand on his head were passed. Her hand lay gently. "You think I'm crazy thinking about Rudd. Guess I've got plenty of spare time to think foolish in. Just before you came that afternoon and asked me to walk, he went up. And around his shoulders there was a sort of smoky cloudy ring. I saw it. He felt it too. He seemed in a hurry to get up as if when he saw his wife it'd go."

"Haven't people a right to be happy?" Dawson raised his head.

"O yes. I hope so. But when they've a right to, don't they laugh?"

"There's nothing the matter with Rudd. He's a good worker . . a good man."

Jane clasped her hands about her eyes. "O it's terrible. That's just it? What is the matter?"

"What is the matter with you?"

City Block

She looked at him straight. "Nothing's the matter with me. I want to help him. I can't. I know I can't ever help him. If they'd come to me and say Help me! I'd do whatever it was . . whatever it was. He won't. He won't ask nobody for any help. He's happy, helpless."

Dawson pondered.

"You see something, Jane. Something deep. But I cannot see what you see."

She looked at him. "Christ isn't in it," she murmured.

Dawson was still.

"John, don't you believe in Christ?"

—Ashamed again. Ashamed always! "Jane dear, I don't know. I think I believe in God. I can't quite seem to say when you're there, I don't believe in God."

"I don't know about God . . but I believe in Christ."

"I don't know about God, either."

"Father Dennis, he says no one can know nothing about God. He says that's why God became Christ . . so we could know about Christ. He says, Father Dennis does, the only people who ever know about God are the Jews. He says that's why they don't have to know about Christ."

"To be saved, does he say? Jews can be saved without believing in Christ?"

Jane nodded. She was very sure. "He says so, John."

"You have long talks with this Priest . . .?"

City Block

"Yes."

"He confesses you?"

"Yes."

"What will he say about me?"

"I can't ever tell you that."

"Why, Jane? why not?" he was plaintive.

She brought her face closer. She clasped her hands harder. "John dear . . dear John," she said, "you won't be here then, will you?"

He had the impulse to bury his head in his hands . . to weep. —No, no! He looked at her instead.

"Jane! there are tears in your eyes."

She smiled: "This is the first time you ever saw them——"

"Yes."

"Because *yours* came!"

Dawson jumped up. "The little man! the little man's words! . . and yours!" —O God, let me become myself, master this hurting wonder. A balm, an end!

He came close to her, took her shoulder, lifted her up, standing against her straight.

"Jane, you do love me. . . You do love me, don't you?"

His hands hurt her flesh. She met him unfaltering, gently.

"John," she said, "we don't love each other. Don't you know that?"

Three days John Dawson had not gone to work. He must see the little man who walked with his Dream. That was urgent. He knew nothing about him save that he lived on the Block and taught school and walked after school hours. Nights it would be hard to find him. Afternoon was the time. He paced the street, back and forth, where he could command both corners. Yesterday it rained. Did he not walk in the rain? Why not, if his Dream is loveliness serene? Today too it rains.

Three days John Dawson has been sick in conflict. He has sought Jane, touched her, clasped her shoulders, her hips. "You are real!" He has run away, leaving her in her terrible smiling silence: himself a storm, following himself, driving himself rather.

—She is real. I felt her. I have felt her enough.

But he could not be sure. The little man must help.

—I am not real. I am not a person. How can I measure her? What measure have I except myself? Is she real *like me* . . . whatever my reality amounts to . . . or is she not? That's as far as I can go.

He looked upon his life with a strange ironic acceptance. —*She* troubles me, not I. This protuberance upon me of myself, what is it, what is its shape? *Upon me!* Upon what?

City Block

—The little man! the little man!

John marches in the rain.

—I won't go back! If I touch her and she responds to my own vague reality what have I learned? He saw her on the street . . . once with her brother, small ruddy man, so sure and so weak. He turned aside beyond them. Dimly he sensed himself in pain and in travail. —Better go home. Stick it out. You've got money enough for weeks; stick it out in your room. Or take another room, if that one's too full of Jane, whatever she is. Dimly he sensed that seeking the little man was an evasion from the whole birth of himself. But that strong he was not. . .

It rains. The little man comes up. Through the slate-wet air there he is, wrapped in a raincoat glistening black: over his little shoulders a cape, on his wide white head a hood. Bobbing along.

Dawson followed. He wore no coat. It was a warm June rain. His rough suit sloughed in heavy folds about him. His slouch hat sluiced the water to his shoulders; at his knees the wet cut like a knife. Dawson followed. He was furiously intent, cunning withal: in faith that at the moment for accosting the little man he would know.

They marched toward Central Park. The clear asphalt walks cut and swished through the lawns like sluggish eels upon a silent sea. The trees stood mournful, bowing in the watery world. Two men, a large, a small, stood in the strained solitude and talked.

City Block

"So you've come back?" the little man looked at him unafraid.

"Yes. I've come back. I may be mad. But I don't mind with you. For you may be also."

"What do you want, sir?"

"I want your help! . . . Now look here. Don't be afraid of me. I'm a good citizen. My name is Evans. I'm an engineer by profession and a bit of a tramp and a mechanic by choice. For ever or for a while . . . I don't know."

The little man bowed courteously. "I am glad to meet you, Mr Evans. My name is Mr Carber. Mr Godfrey Carber."

"Thank you!" Dawson spoke warmly. "You are good. . . And perhaps neither of us is mad. Will you help me?"

"What can I do?"

"Tell me . . . this girl who came, just after I'd seen or felt or somehow sensed your Dora . . . I've been living with her. She is loveliness too. Is she real?"

"Why not?"

"That's where you can help me! That's just where you must help me! How can I know? Look at the state I'm in. Is that what . . . what would come of dwelling with loveliness? Look how sure you are? You're happy."

"Yes . . . yes," murmured Mr Carber.

Dawson stopped. He studied this little man listening vaguely, weakly to his words. —You too? Shamed again by you? Are you real either?

City Block

Carber nodding. "Yes . . . yes," he murmured. "Yes. My love is serene."

"Because it has no reality at all?" Dawson shouted. He was sorry.

Mr Carber looked at him commiserating, quiet. "Suffering makes you say wild words," he spoke softly. "It is nothing, sir. I forgive you."

Formally he bowed. If he had worn a hat instead of a hood, he would have doffed it in his courteous gesture. He went, unchanged, half lifted in his stride above the glittering wet walk. . .

Dawson left the Park. He struck toward home. But he veered. The forking carapace of streets, smoky with rain, swung him off. He marched upon it, feeling as under his feet the meat of men, swollen, pulsant, compressed. He walked into night. Above his turbulent thoughts, gathered in choke, the darkness came with sureness like an omen. He walked fast. He walked far. He carried with him the stifle of his thoughts. He met everywhere the coming down of night.

"What is the matter? what is the matter?" he spoke to himself, if he could find a self: he let out, rather, his words in that vague projectory which makes of them a cry. He was crying; and it tortured him in his articulated life, the mature sure joints of his body, his senses, his mind, that he was crying. —I am a man and I'm sure of myself. He tried to be heartened. —If I want to take a few years off from my sure way, can't I? If I want

City Block

to have a love affair with a strange sprite of a girl, can't I? If I want to go back——

He knew that he was lying. Wasn't his silly search of the little man enough? Here was a strangeness upon him, valid and saliently, because it was the world. —That's the thing to admit! The houses cut past him, rigidly out of joint: he slipped through houses, streets as if through an iron shirt that bit him. —Who is Jane? He tried to see this girl who had wrought such emptiness upon the ease of his vagabondage. He had not thought of her: a girl, Irish, living with her brother, why don't she marry? . . not more than that. There upon that first afternoon she rises like a young tree . . like life since then, like all this changeling world suddenly salient and compelling; suddenly unbearable if he escaped it or if he met it. "Jane, let me look at you, Jane: let me touch you, Jane. Let me know!" The words were liquid, bubbles of pain from the large sure frame of the man cutting along through the rain-blue streets of New York.

The Block . . the stairs . . her flat. He knocked at a door.

Jane opened. Her silent body, clad in grey-blue wrap over her throat down to her slippered feet, let him in. —Not your body to let me in, now, Jane. Where are *you*? If you let me in, I may find myself. . . .

"You are wet!"

City Block

He was aware of the little streams of rain running from him to the floor.

"Take off your shoes, your socks and your coat."

"I can go up——"

"No."

She left him. He compressed his mind to this grateful little business. Slowly, carefully, he leaned over and took off his wringing shoes and placed them under the hatrack; he pulled off his socks and took off his hat and his coat and folded them away. He was wet to the skin, but he no longer dripped. Something in him was sorry. He moved deliberate as if before him was a door, a door of execution, some parturient death? through which when he no longer dripped rain on the floor, he must unalterably pass.

She called to him: "Go into the kitchen where it's warm."

He saw it was a kitchen: stove, table, plates. There was embracing dryness.

Jane came in: a grey dress now. She smiled. She carried his wet things. She hung and distributed them about to get the heat of the stove.

"You won't catch cold?"

"I have worked ten hours in a River."

"Stay near the stove, though."

Her eyes were bright. All else of her was dim. She came to him, so.

He held her a moment in his arms. He did not kiss her. He saw the print of his wet shirt on her

City Block

waist, the wet straggle of her hair from him. —*She is real, then!*

"Jane, the only way I can explain what's happening to me is that I love you."

She sat down. The print of his wetness on her seemed to gladden her. She was less dim. She was a flower watered.

"What, John, has happened?"

"I try to think what has happened. . ."

Suddenly, he was weak. He stood there tremulous of knee, and tried to think. Jane was up. She brought a chair. He collapsed in it. "I have been suffering," he said. Then he looked up. He was calmer. The air was dry. The wet of his clothes sheathed him like steel, but the air and himself were dry.

"I am beaten, Jane. I challenged something. I don't know what. I am beaten."

She sat calm. But he saw the throbbing of her throat. Her eyes were still, almost a glaze was on them in their dryness.

"I see that you feel sorry for me, Jane. That's probably all. I thought I was master . . a sort of knight-errant. You don't understand? Well, a sort of man who could break open Castles and kill Ogres. I could; I did. I'm a damn good Builder, I tell you. I thought I'd swept you with a gesture of love into my arms. I was fooled. You with a gesture of pity take me into yours. You . . and that mild idiot with a Dream called Dora . . you've done for me. That's all."

City Block

"Not all," she said. "I don't understand what you're saying. But I know what you say isn't all."

"I am done for. I cannot stand it."

"You must eat . . you must grow up."

"Will you feed me, Jane?"

"The coffee's ready. You'd better not eat till you're dry."

They sat in silence while he drank his cup. She let him have a half of a slice of bread. He ate and drank slowly. He was not hungry at all. He had not eaten for days.

—I am a beggar. Beggars get nothing.

"Jane," he put down his cup, "what can I give to you?"

Then her eyes changed. Steadfast and glazed and dry they had been, watching him, holding him there, his turbulence contained in her blind wit. Now they changed. They were soft and green. They were a little moist.

She got up. . . A noise at the latch. The door thrust open, thrust them apart into two corners of the kitchen.

Peter stepped in to the room. Peter bowed vaguely. Short, shorter than Jane and heavy, Peter stood there balanced in this equation of puzzlement about him. He too was wet. His round boyish face glowed with the liquor in him. His blue eyes were lost in their daze. His gentle mouth, too small, twitched and his fleeting chin wrinkled with his effort to be calm.

City Block

"Hello, Mr Dawson, Hello . . . I'm glad to see ye."

"Sit down, Peter," said Jane. "I caught John sopping and made him come in and fed him a cup of coffee. Want some?"

"No." The boy saw the big man coatless, bare-foot. A vague of irritation swept him. But he sat down.

"Peter, I'm glad you came when you did! I want to talk with you," Dawson stepped closer.

—A man! a man! He could be master with a man! Master again. He was glad. He stood at his full height and his bare feet made him taller to himself, before this man whose weakness was to let him be master again. That which was breaking in him . . builder of bridges, leveller of castles . . strode in one convulsive effort together in him, coalesced, made itself whole once more from the despair of fear for the ultimate moment of dissolution it had glimpsed before Peter came in.

"What is it, man?" Peter was comfortless. He felt the strain and the strangeness. He could not be sure if it was a reality about him in these two usually normal persons, or in himself in drink. This hurt.

"I want," said Dawson, "to tell you about Jane and me." —*That is it!* Make Peter a party. Peter . . earthy boy, no Dream, no Christ in him . . if he can hold it, if he can see it, it's true. Let Peter prove it!

He watched him mumbling in surprise: "—about

City Block

you and Jane?" He was an earthy man. Simple and perfect. Solid and short and clear.

Dawson eased himself on his feet, and his hands clenched: "Jane and I . . . three weeks ago, something happened between us. Don't let's give it a name."

He saw her, still in her corner where she had not moved. He saw her brother tense. "We—I want you to know, Peter. So you can understand. You love Jane too. And she you. It's right, somehow, not to keep you outside: that's what's been troubling me."

Peter's hand went to his brow. He did not understand. What was this muddle?

"It came sudden, strong. It has gone on. We——"

"Why don't you out with it, then? Why all this fuss? You're going to marry, I suppose? Well—if Jane——"

"No, Peter. There's not been any of that," Jane spoke from her quiet place.

"Any of what?"

"Any of marriage. I've been going to his room. I've been living with him, Peter. See? Nothing more——"

The brother sprang up. "Nothing more!" His hands wrung round in a frenetic circle. "Nothing more!" He could not face them both at once. He swung. "You've been living together! *You*, Jane . . . *you* a whore? You cad, you!" He stopped

in front of Dawson. "Who in hell are you? . . what in hell right——"

"Keep still, man."

"You tell me to keep still!"

Peter poised back in an ominous pause and hurled himself at Dawson's throat. Dawson bent in the impact. His hands moved swiftly for a hold on the scrimmaging, fighting wild man at his flesh. He grappled him, flung him in a furious heap.

Peter's head hurled against the table's edge. He crumpled below it, crimson in his blood.

The standing man and the standing woman were still. The room was between them . . and the moveless body crimson in its blood.

"I've killed him," said Dawson.

Jane was above her brother. Her hands were red. She got up. Her eyes and her face broke into despair. She cried. She tore down her hair. She stained her face and her dress with her brother's blood. She said no word. She was broken and very ugly.

He saw her.

—This is the reason and the end of John Dawson! He felt calm. His stomach was empty and his head was clear. —This is the End?

—Red-eyed ignorant girl. Mad with your animal grief. Vulgar. Terrible . . vulgar. You are not lovely. You *were* a dream. Thanks, Peter. Sorry you're dead. What of it? Soon I'll be too. Dawson will follow Evans. A little less subtly.

City Block

That's right. Evans just disappeared. Dawson, earthier, solider, needs an electric chair for the same process. Thank God for that, though! Thank God for that! It is the same process . . to put an End to it all.

He turned toward Jane: "There is nothing to say. I am going to give myself up to the Police."

He looked at her. She was back in the same corner: she stood as within the whirl of a maelstrom: rigid, still.

"Good bye," he said. She did not move. He left. . .

4

Slowly, with unbroken unhesitant gait John Dawson walked to the corner of the Block. He stopped. He turned about. Slowly, with unbroken unhesitant gait, the man walked back.

He mounted the stairs. He came into the room for he had left the door unlatched behind him.

Nothing had changed. The bloody body lay upon the floor. Jane stood stiff and wild within her maelstrom.

"Jane," spoke the man, "can you hear me? Jane, it is important that you hear me. Give me some sign . . a nod . . so I know you can hear me."

He waited. Her hand lifted faintly and fell back. Her eyes were looking nowhere.

"Thank you. I have come back, Jane, for you. I know you'll know I've not come back because

City Block

I'm afraid of prison. I've come back because when I was walking toward jail out there . . it all seemed so marvelously simple, so sweet: giving myself up, putting the State to the trouble of getting rid of me, freeing myself even of that effort. So sweet and easy. And then something happened, Jane. I began to think of you." She stirred. "And the ease of shuffling off was horrible. So I came back. I don't know what for. To ask you . . what can I do?"

He looked at her. He could not read her eyes.

"Jane, I'm no use to myself. I'm a failure. I'm not a person. I don't know why. Perhaps something was left out of my food as a child . . that kept me from becoming a man. But can I be of some use as a tool? Something *you* can use? O I hope so! O Jane, if in any way you can use me, do! Don't despise me so much, Jane. Use me—living or dead. If you can. Of course, if you can't—if I'm not even good for a tool——"

The girl, rigid, ugly in her corner. —She suffers! Sudden, he felt her suffer. Her pain was a flood from within him. Her pain washed him painless. He leaned on the warm flood of pain. He stood straight. But in his suffering, he seemed prone. . .

Jane's face opened. She moved, easeful, as if she had not been encased, a moment before, in a whirlwind.

She left the room. She came back. She carried in her hands a bundle of towels and a little crystal

MY Desire is within me. . He walks toward the Block where is his Church and his home. —Does my Desire come because it is Christmas Eve? But there is no such thing . . I am a priest! . . as Christmas Eve. My Desire is real. You are right to be a priest.

The Elevated structure is high here. He had stood on the car's platform swinging in a vast pendulum above houses. The rails swung him straight as in a circle's segment: but the street sank, the houses thrust up higher in a sort of frenzy to meet him. The train panted, raced away: the city thrust up. They were joined: train, blind sky, the street and himself so hazardously caught in the pendulous swing of the platform of the car. Gate opened. He stepped out: a shell of wood holding him high from falling. He goes downstairs and he is somewhat dizzy.

The street is dark with grey sidings of snow. The people move and clutter between stone and sky. The people are one color. Between the arch of rails and the black shadows, they are like creatures in a secret . . spoiled by a secret. --They who are naught and who think naught are in the secret. I who think, am outside. Because I think? What do you mean by that, God? He walked.

City Block

And as he walks the splendor of this world is sheer unbearably. —This dirty noisy street, I wouldn't live in it: what splendor! The houses stand like the lips of a Mask and the crowd is words. And all of it dark splendor.

—My Desire is with me. When I first looked within me to my Desire, I saw yellow and hard. Gold! I have tried to make my life a humble shining and a humble sureness against Gold. I have looked deeper. What is this Gold? Strands writhe in a dim flesh like twisted rays of a sun strayed into night. Within my soul, if I look, I see entrails of my belly. So I have tried to make my life a glow to blind flesh, a stir to dead flesh. . .

He was tall and straight. —So often as I walk, I walk beside my mother. . . “You must be rich, Luis. In this country, when you're not rich there's no use.” —This land: then I won't be rich! I see you, mother, lest I hear you. The one blots the other out, seeing is better. He walked the steep street and there were few of the human words churning about him, so clear as he, so straight. He wore his habit well. The black warmed the ivory coolness of his face: the little circling collar made his jaw fine and square. He wore no gloves and his hands lay calm in the cold air. It was the dark of the afternoon: the terrible new dark after the winter sun when the street shudders and rends itself with fear at its new loss. No sun, no wind. The city glowed in its own fertility: frightened to find itself so suddenly alone and so suddenly alive under

City Block

a stony sky. The lights muttered, feet wove, the eyes of men and women were sharp threads in a weave that was the swing of the street and of the "L."

He walked. —I hear my name. Luis Ájala Dennis.* Is that a word? am I a word? and which is hard to pronounce? The crucifix on the breast of the Pope or his guts . . which is real? Saint Simeon Stylites testifies that words hard to pronounce are sweet on the Tongue of God. So I may pass. Wealth enough for you, mother, if I pass. Why you don't know, mother! Even the whites of my eyes gleam yellow, even my dung is amber. Am I not rich enough for you, my mother? . . It is Christmas Eve. And I don't know if Christmas ever was. I'm a good priest. He turned the angle swiftly to the Block.

At the head of the dark stairs was the door of his room. A shadow stood fumbling before the door: stood thick between the stair and his room. Luis came up. Behind him the gas light threw a scatter of ghosts of light like the chimes of gilt bells on the sombre form of a man.

"Oh!"

"Excuse me, father Dennis. I just knocked at your door. And you were not there."

"I am here."

*The priest always pronounced and insisted that his friends pronounce the middle name . . the name of his mother . . in the true Castilian accent which she spoke: the stress forward on the *A* and the *j* aspirated hard, somewhat like the German *ch*.

City Block

The priest, from the chaos of his questions of the world, drew in: drew in solid.

"Mr. Kandro?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come in." . . .

Clicket of keys on ring, creak of latch, swing of door . . more splinters from the chaos drawing together the priest.

"Just a moment. I'll have a light."

There was a light. A light in the room and they two in the room that was about the men: but the light seemed beyond the room: it fell into this shut warm place with its books and its rug and its mellow wooden Christ above the mantel, like a stroke from outside. The dun shade holding the lamp on the littered table was but a directer obstacle in the flung lance of the light holding it sheer. The light swam in broken ripples to all else . . even the waving ceiling, even the black beard of the man and the gold face of the other.

Luis touched a chair.

"Won't you sit down, Mr Kandro?"

He was as tall as the priest, but all thick, all dark, all knotted and all cloud. He looked at the Christ. There were three men in the room.

Before the Christ burned two altar candles low, in the thick glass sockets. His wood was a running song: bits of paint red and gold lay on the running of his wooden form like petals on water. Christ was slender and warm above his little flames. His face was thin and the lips had a cleft in them.

City Block

Sweetly he raised an arm: its wrist was handleless.

"You'll sit? Pray sit down, sir."

The heavy form of Mr Kandro trembled, moved forward.

"Father Dennis," he said and he thrust forth his hands below the Christ on the mantel. "Look at them."

Luis looked. The hands of Mr Kandro, coming from black sleeves, looked red.

"How do they look?"

"They look red," said Luis.

Mr Kandro raised his hands and laid them like two pains upon his cheek. Faintly he swayed his head. He let them fall.

"That's what I thought," he murmured.

"Mr Kandro . . this is no time, this is not the place for Confession."

"I am not asking absolution, sir. I am not asking Confession. I wanted your eyes . . for their color."

The young man watched him: gentle man, muffled as in a warm black cloud. —Thunder-cloud? Possibly. But he is soft like a child. Luis sat down.

"Come, have a chair. You'll smoke a cigar? I'm not in a hurry."

"Thank you," Mr Kandro sat. "I don't smoke either."

Seated face to face beneath the mantel and the third man there, they were small. The Christ rose cool and sharp: Mr Kandro a dark word . . a

City Block

mumbling as of a vague surmise in the room's dark breath. And the room wavered and turned, it was astir mutely in this alien light that lanced upon it from Space.

No word. No word. They sat beneath the mantel. The young man straight and white: the older huddled like his mouth in his beard, blackly within the room. Before him, limp, hung his huge soft hands. They looked red.

A sharp tremor jerked his hands up . . . let them fall. "Father," he spoke, "I am sixty-five years old . . . and I have never lain in the arms of a woman." Silence. He spoke: "Father, I have come to know that I shall never have this. I have lived, lived on, thinking almost without thought: 'it will be.' Now, it has come to me that it will never be."

"What have your hands done?" Luis whispered.

"They have done nothing. . . And you saw them red."

"Why do you come to me?" Luis leaned forward.

"You are a priest. . . You also never have lain within a woman's arms. Or if you have, it was a sin and is gone. That's why I come to you. I want you——"

"Yes?"

"Tell me that I am not cursed with this! Tell me why you saw my hands red . . . hands that have done nothing . . . if I am not cursed."

— I must lean back in my chair. I must shut my hands into fists so that no part of me flows

City Block

out! This man has sucked me . . what does he want? . . from myself. Myself! What madness does he want of me for himself?

"You are not cursed. You should know better than that."

"How do you know?" he pleaded. "Do you see the color of my soul? My hands . . aren't they red?"

"You are in love with sin?"

The old man was moveless.

"Give me what you know!"

"Why should you think that I can give to you? What do I know of your life? what do I know of your reasons?"

"No woman——"

"Have you loved a woman, then?"

Mr Kandro nodded. "Long ago. And she . . ." his voice sharpened: "Never mind the story. I have been true to my hurt. I have been true to my pride. And so my hands are red? Is that what the Church teaches?"

Luis bent forward. "Hush! Who knows what She teaches?" —And you perhaps wiser than I.

"Think! Think," cried the old man. "A woman's body is a white straight thing. It is a healing we can take whole upon us. It can touch every pore of our aching hungry body . . touch me all with her white straight healing!"

"Go get a woman! You are mad with your desire!"

Mr Kandro came forward from his chair. He

City Block

did not rise. He moved near. He came close. He was on his knees, coming close.

—Go away! Who are you? Go away!

“I know how I can be cured of my desire,” he said. “Tell me of yours.”

—Sit still! Luis fought the need of rising, of running, of striking.

“I am a priest. But I am a man,” he said. “When the waves tide up, I pray and I work. What mystery in this?”

“Is it Pride and the love of your Hurt that keeps you also away from the white healing?”

The words came very low from the strange black heap at his feet. They came, and they entered the young man. He saw his mother.

. . . “You must be rich, my Luis. You must be great. I want it. You are handsome and brilliant. You will go far. You will marry wealth. You will come to power.”

—My mother, I see you. And your words are quenched.

“I dream for you, son.”

—Mother, I dream away from the sight of you. Let me humble and poor and lone, since your words crowd so close to my heart!

“Get up, Mr Kandro.”

The old man obeyed.

Father Dennis paced the room. He paced. He stopped from pacing. . . —Still a little dizzy. The street beneath the plunging train, houses up-thrust, and the fact of Christmas Eve . . . does it exist after

City Block

all? He passed his hands through his fine hair, thinking: —why is it not more strange?

—This face before me! I step up to see this face beneath its beard, more clear. . .

—The face is gone. The body, is it still crouched in the chair or kneeling before me? . . flat wide knees on my rug? They are gone! My words:

“Look! What if you have sinned in abstinence more deeply than the lowest lecher? What if I am sinning in my holy state . . dreaming incestuous dreams that all my blood and all my entrails blanket from my mind? What of it? Who cares about Sin? Not Christ, surely! Not Saint Paul! Not our holy Mother Church that blots Sin out, insignificant and mean, before a word . . for a candle!”

. . . He had had these words! The old man's face very white in the dark room, in the dark beard. His eyes small, boyish-blue, and the red lips glimpsed in the black bush of hair. And a brow, smooth like the hand of a girl. —These words I had! Are they gone?

Father Luis Ajala Dennis turned his head about the study room where he lived. He saw the wooden Christ. He went to him. With the forefinger of each hand, he thrust into the altar candles, put them out. On his fingers, over the smart, was wax.

He sat down.

—What are the words that I have said? What are you doing here, you darkling man? *But he's gone! Who sent you, eh? But he's gone! he is here!* Pushed out beyond the presence of my mind:

City Block

but he's here. . . And there's another presence with me too. Not yet in the presence of my mind this one. She is a woman. She is here. She is coming!

A knock. He goes to the lamp, lifts the flame to its full height. —It's the lamp burning, makes the light. Nothing else. He knew that he lied.

A knock. He goes to the mantel and gazes at the Christ. He relights the candles. Kneeling, he holds his face prone to the floor. The wooden Christ rises, still flame, in his shut eyes. *A knock.* Luis crosses the room.

—Here she is.

A woman stepped in with the street's crystal colors sparking like gems from her hair and her cloak and her skirt. She wears no hat. She has run.

"Mrs Lipper! You——?"

"May I come in, sir?"

"Surely, surely. . . Mrs Lipper——?"

He is still. The woman glides full into the room, drenches herself in his room, drenches herself in the light that gathers at the lamp but comes from afar. . . She is full in the room. —And I am in it with her.

He knows this woman: wife of Clarence Lipper. Her name he has often admired . . . *Aimée*. . . He is good at names. Names count for him who bears the name of his mother challenging strong whenever the name of his father is spoken by him.

"Yes, my friend?"

She is a little woman. Her hair is dim gold

City Block

and her eyes are dark . . hard gemlike eyes like an animal's astray in her girl face. She is soft and she is crisp and she is tender: but her eyes are there . . rather close one to the other . . two animals, now, peering and strayed and afraid in her warm girl body.

"O . . you are so comfortable here!"

—You did not come at this strange hour . . you too . . to tell me that?

"You must excuse me, father."

"For what must I excuse you?"

Her throat throbbed: "That I am here."

"It is not wrong that you are here, my sister, if there is reason for it . . if you have need of me."

—She too pulling me out of myself. I am Luis . . Luis Ajala Dennis . . what do you want?

She came closer. "O, that is it! I have such need of you."

"Will you sit down and tell me?"

"I can't sit down. Father Dennis . . father Dennis, how can I tell you?"

The room is still, the room is still and full. A prop between them holding them up is the room. It is gone! He sees in her eyes a gap . . and a dizzy falling.

"I am worried, father Dennis."

"Your husband——?"

"Not about him."

"I have had splendid talks with Clarence Lipper. I like him."

"Thank you."

City Block

She smiles. But the propping substance fades and faints and falls.

"He deserves much. Doesn't he, father Dennis?"

"He is good. I think he loves you well. With his best self, I mean. What you mean by 'deserving' I do not know. Do we deserve life? At the best, do we deserve this splendor? At the least, we all have it. . . More than we deserve."

She drew her mouth wryly. —He does not understand. He looked at the words he had just spoken to her. —What do I understand?

But her mouth is full again . . round and soft like a berry, like a magic fruit in the dark.

"I love him too. And that is it, father Dennis."

"What?"

"It is Christmas Eve. I want to give him something."

He watches her. He knows what she does not mean.

"You feel . . you have never given him . . anything at all?"

"Never," she answered clear. They were close, standing in the room. And now at last there was a prop . . true words . . to their upright presence.

"Never! That is it. Can you try to see? He married me. What was I? A pretty girl; a respectable girl. That's nothing and you know it. That was me. And we have lived together . . peaceably. He goes about his business. He is

City Block

away a lot. When he's away . . . downtown or out of town . . . I wait for him. I keep the place clean, I keep his things in order. If he's gone long I write him a letter or two. I see a few friends. I go to a play. And to Mass. I pray for the baby that the Virgin soon will give me. O I know that. Just, not yet. Perhaps she is waiting . . . that is the thought I've had so suddenly today . . . before she gives me that, till I give to *him*."

"And your self . . . your love and your self . . . have you not given him these?"

She shook her head. "I thought you knew women!" She smiled.

". . . He is happy enough. He has joy of me. Surely. But giving, giving! I am the taker. He is too happy, for he is happy giving. If I could give to him he might be less happy. It would be better so."

She sank into the chair where the other man had been. Her gold head bowed so that her eyes were hidden.

"I do not understand," he said. But he stepped closer, above her.

Her eyes looked up. Wild eyes clear in the room. The candles of Christ danced on them and the lancing light drew closer to the lamp from their dark brilliance. With her eyes on him, quickly she stood. They are close now, standing.

—And I am nowhere! . . . His hands were cold and bloodless at his side. Her eyes! Her eyes! —The white straight healing that she is. And

City Block

Sin? What is Sin but a lack, a great Hunger?

She was very close and yet she did not swerve. There at her arms, the fending stuff of her dress breaks off . . white hands! There at her neck, the bitter stuff of her dress breaks off . . white throat, white face! Vestiges . . sparks of the white flame, all she.

They come closer. She saw him watch her hands. She placed her hands behind her, but she did not swerve. His hands go out and clasp her hands behind her. . .

Brow to brow, mouth to mouth, breast to breast. . . They were close. And so they remained.

The lamp gave its word . . the far and sourceless light: the wood Christ sang still through the room. They were close. They were close.

Slow like parting petals of a flower, they were less close. —Soon I shall see all this.

“What have we done?” came his words softly.

She sprang to him. Her arms vised him. Her lips were hot in his. Her breasts stood white in his flesh.

—Soon I shall see, I shall know. . .

They were apart. They were spent.

“And now?” he murmured.

“Now, I must go home.”

“Now . . go . . home?”

“I must tell Clarence.”

“This?”

She smiled; she nodded. Her eyes were dif-

ferent eyes. They were eyes of a woman wise and sure of herself.

"I have something now to give at last to my husband!"

She held out a hand. He clasped it.

"Thank you, father."

—And she is gone. And I have given her that which she can give to her husband!

Luis sank in his chair. —Something at last to give! . . have I said these words she spoke? . . . I do not feel that I have held a woman. When I feel it, I shall know that I have sinned. . . —But you have given! . . words lancing like the light from a far distance.

Luis stood up. The light he had sensed long lancing within his room, burning the lamp, touching the Christ to life, drew him up: he saw whence it came for his eyes were at its source. He stood straight in his room, and he danced. He was moveless, he danced. No tremor of the eye, no hand-twitch; he danced. His beating heart was a mar and a flaw in his dancing. He danced upon the Past, he danced upon the Future: Time was the base of his still feet slowly dancing. And the room and the quiet of its breath embraced within the arms of his Church, were spaces his dancing flesh leaped over, leaped and skipped. . . He danced. The world swung up and down: calm swinging. Jerusalem packed with prayer, Rome red with argument . . sun locked with moon: a stifled wood, a panting sea . . a field mad with light and each

City Block

blade of grass in the field singing and speaking,
shining: plaintive dawns, wide sunsweeps of clean
cities waving in time. . .

—But you! your white sweet hidden flesh!
Where are you?

He yearned for the embrace that he had dwelt
in. He danced before it. He danced past it.
He could not touch it.

—I do not feel you. And I want to feel you!
Sin! O splendor of your flesh, come let me know
you, though Sin must come along.

He feels no thing. He is back once more in
his chair.

—She is here. Her flesh is still upon my own.
There is no sin, there is no Time to sin in.

He could not bear to know that these things
were not yet.

“Come, Time,” he cried aloud. “Come, Time!
Come, Sin! Bring with you knowledge of how
sweet was her flesh.”

He went to the door.—The Church! O blessed
savior Church! You will give them to me!

And like a frightened boy, he rushed praying
down stairs. . .

FOURTEEN

BEGINNING

Paolo Benati Speaks

I GAVE these stories to the man that wrote them. It was hard. Many times after I had reached him I lost him. I was not alone in trying to hold him. When I was moved to give my stories to him, I did not think that others might demand him. I began leisurely, nameless. He had no thought of me, no belief in my being. He had enormous belief in his own. And he took pride for himself in what I gave him. So my will weakened toward him. I became pale, a ghost in my need of giving these stories.

At last I found him rightly. He was in great anguish. He believed, so serious a displacement had followed so vast a flood of conflict, that he was destroyed in spirit. He said to himself: "I am a failure. I am of those sacrificed and consumed." I waited. He said: "I accept this. I am a failure. So be it. I have no claim on other than my fate. So be it. . . There is no injustice," I heard him say, "there is God."

Then I seized him. "Go away," I said, "into some quiet. I have much to say to you. I am a boy and from your standpoint dead. Perhaps you are what you call a failure. Let me use you, since it is good so. I can promise nothing, save that I want you."

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He gave to my urgency upon him. I held him tortured, in obedience. It was good to see him at my work: on a train, at odd hours of the night, in a room filled with the green tumult of drunken sailors. . . At all times he was an instrument I used . . gradually wearing out, bleeding away . . but a good tool.

And so, now that I have delivered myself through him, I release him. I tell about myself, place myself where I belong among these lives that have born me: and let him go. For there are others not done with him: one in especial I see, greater than I, far better and far greater: with dark hot old eyes . . my own are young . . one whose breast is high with Song as the trunk of a great tree, whose mouth is heavy with Prayer as a vine with ripe grapes. This one approaches to make his voice, already heard at times, unintermittent, Whole. He is high but he is kind. For he has paused, looking upon me with a sweet forbearance, until I have done with my scribe. . .

.

My name is Paolo Benati.

When one is gone after but fifteen years in the Sun, one recalls the suns of one's childhood. My mother, my father and I were deep down in a boat carrying us from Genoa to New York. The boat had smells: they were to me living, voluminous and rolling. Brown smells splashed with gold by day, black smells and red by night. My mother stood

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between the smells and me. The boat stopped before it reached New York: I remember one sun upon our passage. A steep hard city full of mellow bodies. They moved and called through the tight streets like silent shadows of twilight in free fields, caught here, fragmented, moulded by the twisting gutters. . . I remember New York only as the world I lived in . . common of many suns and many shadows . . not clear like that town in the passing, which must have been in Spain.

My father was a good barber. He had two assistants, Romano and Cicero, who could not live without him. He had a lazy body: his mouth and his mind were not lazy. He did not often serve his customers himself. But they all came because of him, and Cicero and Romano worked because of him: and so he was the real boss and something of his person, finer than the mere handling of razor and shears, went into the service of each customer who came and who came again.

From when I was very small—and I did not become tall—I knew that father was short and fat and rather funny to look at. His curly black hair, parted sharp like a knife-edge in the middle, shined: his face was red: he wore upon a scarlet or white vest a chain of huge gold links that made his uprising stomach very clear to see. And yet, since he wore the chain and had chosen it himself, he must have wanted this. Father took joy in himself, he took joy even in his stomach. He took joy in mother. "Dear old ugly," he called her.

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For mother was ugly and dear, and older than her man. Father took joy in life. Only I made him unhappy.

"Why don't he smile? Well, Paolo, can't you smile? Lookit us two. Your handsome Papa chained to this ugly peasant—look at the old woman!—and loving her, and turning down for her all the pretty girls who make eyes at me when I sit at the window counting change. Now, ain't that funny? Why don't you laugh?"

Mama seemed ugly because she had so thick a skin: olive-green, leathery, always a little oily. And her black hair was a mane—I have seen her break a comb in it. But it was good to look at mother. Her grey eyes were deep. Her hands were sweetly cool! Her voice was low, it throbbed so very quiet. No wonder father who was young and had a voice like a cornet loved mother who was fertile with mellowness, who was kind and deep and quiet like a harvest field . . . ugly Mama whose smile made me sad, so full it was of beauty.

"He will smile some day," she defended me.

"When? When he's dead?" mocked father.

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It was strange with me, I know. I knew it better than father who when he spoke at random often spoke true: better than mother who knew most when she was still. She used to place the tips of her fingers upon my eyes and hold them there: and that was her embrace.

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What first did I feel, feeling that it was strange with me? How shall I make this clear?

There was the house when we first came and I was four years old. The barber shop was in the basement below the level of the street. An iron rail fenced the brownstone area-way that made a small recess between the soiled street and the bright store, all glass and gilt. Above it, the house—high, stolid, with its monotonous small windows like eyes . . . snake's eyes or a monster's . . . peering against the open world from a hot swarm of secrets. I remember when I saw the house, and I said:

“Mama, the stone house will break down on the glass store.”

Father laughed. His laughter did not hurt me. “He knows nothing,” I thought to myself. And I knew then that this was strange: how I should know what my father laughed at, not be hurt by his laughter.

I was afraid of the store. We lived above it, behind the wall of stone and a pair of the peering window eyes. So I felt safe. I stayed very much in the room, alone. And all my thoughts were for the little shop below which was a little box of glass holding my father, and upholding a mountain of dark stone.

I thought of the house crashing down, and the glass box crushing, splintering with my father, bright like it, within it. He seemed to me very

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brave. "I must be brave too," I said. I went down to the shop.

Father was alone, for in those first days Cicero and Romano had not come. On the other side of the door, in the same area-way, there was a carpenter who hammered but who had no glass front. (Later his shop became a part of ours and our glass front was extended.) Papa stood before the mirror and with fingers daintily curled up, he combed his hair.

"Hello, son," he called and went on. "What is it?"

I was very excited, for I had resolved to be brave too, and here I was in the shop, being brave, with father alone. I took a seat and did not say a word. A man came in. He had long black hair beneath his mouth and straggling thin grey strands above his brow. Father cut these and let the beard alone, and the strangeness of this seemed right to my strange mood.

Father let me alone. I swathed myself, sitting there, in the sharp air of the shop—bayrum and hair and perfume and men's sweat. I said to myself: "I am brave too." I began to lose the looming sense of the house, resting on glass above my head—so fragile.

Father said: "Paolo, bring me a towel? Over there . . . see? . . . in that drawer."

Next year I went to school, and afternoons I began to work in the shop.

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I loved it. As a child loves, of course: not articulate the word, not articulate the need. The shop became a part of me, of my sense, of my life, of my growing. That's how I loved it.

The high house of stone spread out on each side, making a wall of the high dark City Block. The little store where I worked was a core of crystal. It upheld the wall of stone with its sombre secrets peering through blank windows. I worked in my glass store . . . chairs in brass and plush, air of shoe polish, alcohol, hair and sweat . . . yet it was sharp. The world of stone compressing it made it sharp, made crystal clear this little place trussing the Block.

I was good at shining shoes. I shined very fast. I used little blacking, and with the polishing cloth was swift and graceful. Shoes gleamed from my hands. Men, and women too, came and chatted with me while I worked fast. I did not answer them. I did not know the names of these men and women. They came in all moods . . . that was clear: expectant, opaque to possible tomorrows, sorrowful, joyful. They came in tenderness or broken through by cold lights of envy or shrunk with black fires of fear. Often they were familiar with me. They used my name . . . Paolo, Pauly, Paul. I did not know how in my not knowing theirs a door in my heart was open whence they passed silently in.

I worked. Cicero and Romano worked. Father with his smiling face and his quick mind worked,

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too. The shop hummed like a machine moving, crowded with force to move. I did not smile as I worked. I did not know why I should not smile; I did not know why I was working there. So I was not happy, although I lived in love. My chamois cloth snapped on the leather shoe knobs. It snapped, I rubbed. It snapped in tune with the hard click of scissors. A voice came in me.

—Pursue, pursue. 8
There's a great white cloud after you.
Be still, be still,
Pretty soon and the Dream comes true
If you will
Be true and be still.

. . . something like these words. I did not understand. My mind took these sounds . . they were never quite words, I never could separate words, but what I seemed to hear amounted to what these words now seem to say . . my mind failed to understand. Yet the words contented me. They came when Strangeness was most strong. The shop was a sharp imprisonment and I afraid of the Outside and the In. Then I was comforted. I knew this also strange, since my mind did not understand.

.

I have no history. It is hard for me to speak at this last when I must speak of myself. It was so easy before, speaking about these other men

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and women who suffered and joyed and lived, who came to the shop . . shoes to be shined . . and went. But I must go on. I have no history. Yet I must fill these pages with myself. I must! I also do not choose. I am no master, no more than you, my scribe. I too am blind and am driven. . .

One thing more, from the very outset; I knew. I loved! There was love in my heart. Like any child, the words *good* and *bad* and *beautiful*, the word *God* came to my ears. I accepted them. They had meaning. It matters not what meaning. They were important, for from the first I could use them. This proves that there was also . . beyond the blindness, beyond the driving . . Love.

I could not smile. My father was vexed because, as he thought, I would not smile. His business prospered. He gave me money, lots of money.

"Buy what you want, my son. Go ahead. And if that's not enough for what you want, ask me for more. Buy what'll make you a little jollier, eh?"

I did not know what to do with all my money . . dimes and dollar bills and quarters. I brought them to my mother.

"Here, Mama. Papa gave me this again. I had to take it. I'd have hurt him——"

"Buy something, Paolo."

"Mother, what do I want?"

"No. Keep it, then. Some day you'll want something, son. It may cost lots of money when at last you want something. Save your money till

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then. Put it away. It may be a watch or a jewel—something for a girl.”

“Mama, I obey you. But I shall never want something to give to a girl.”

“Pooh! at your age, you think so. Wait till you’re older. Wait ten years.”

“I won’t be older in ten years, Mama.”

“Paolo dear, when you talk such foolish words, at least you should laugh with me.”

Then I laughed. I laughed only with mother, alone. And she never told my father that I laughed.

“He’s known as the boy that don’t smile.” Mama looked very wise and shaking her head. “But he laughs—O yes, some time.” She was glad in her secret. She did not say that often I laughed with her.

When she was there alone, I said silently, so she did not hear: “It is because you’re so funny, Mama. It’s because we’re so funny together. You, dear ugly lovely Mama and I, your son, who is pretty like Papa. It’s so funny that I should be a pretty boy and that you should have a skin like the young elephant in Central Park.”

Later, even with mother, I did not laugh. I worked for father. I went to school. At nights in my room in the high stone Wall I took off my clothes, I shut off the light. I slipped into bed. I was with the Presence, holy and awful, that let me for a little while do such little stupid things as to work or to go to school.

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And sleep. I loved sleep. I loved it always, as one who knows that very soon for him the time is coming when he will sleep no longer.

I lay in bed and stretched out my legs: drank in like a sweet dark wine the knowing of sleep. I loved to be very warm to sweating, under many blankets. I loved the window open and the air cold, and so sweating in bed. I gave my self up to great heat and great blackness.

Then I awoke. Silent lightlessness. I breathed in the night. We breathed together. A quiver against the perfect night. It was a thought of silver, running silver-free athwart the black grain of the world.

"What is it? what are you? what do you feel?"
. . it was a silver whisper.

I knew it was ill that there should be a whisper against stillness, silver against black. —You must atone for this! Perfection was broken. I moved along a widening way of wrongness. For I had asked a question of the Night.

I knew that it was ill: but that it had to be. It was life. All life a whisper or a shriek . . silver or red . . against the silent black. All life—I am alive!

In these hours I knew the stories of the men and women who came and whose shoes I shined. In these hours I felt their stir, their clamoring word. I felt the rent of pain that was each voice of their hearts, each word of their minds against Night.

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I saw the blood bleeding as they moved . . a rent . . against immobile fate.

“—To bring them stillness, to bring them whiteness,” I said. And these words were not a gash upon the Night! . . .

I forgot my words. I grew slowly. I had no history, I was an uninteresting boy. People said of me: “He shines shoes all right” or “He’s a good scholar” or “He’s a pretty boy with his black hair always mussed and his violet grey eyes and his fine long mouth—but why don’t he play with the other boys and girls?” . . . “Why don’t he laugh?” . . . “Why is he so gloomy?”

These were stupid people for I was not gloomy. My mother knew better than this. She found no fault with me. She was reserved and happy with my being. We sat together evenings: we took walks in the Park. In the summers, father made us go away to the sea-shore for a vacation. We said very little. We were not waiting to speak. Everything we felt had been said save a silence which under different names we worshiped together.

My nights I had always . . more and more frequent they were. I did not seek them. I did not seek the discording questions that made clear the night and the stirring fleck of myself. I was enwrapped in heat and darkness beyond will. Then the birth came: the subtle thread of my being, of the beings of them whom I crossed in the Block, whose shoes I shined: the pity of their whisper or

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their shriek . . the silver or the blood . . against immobile stillness.

I have thought no farther than this. Again and again: "to bring the stillness they break, the whiteness they mar" . . the words came and were atuned—these words—with my night. For white and black, I have found since, are one.

Again I put aside my words. I slept. I shined shoes in the shop. My father accepted me with a greater ease: something tiring in him made him less curious, less troubled. His cheer was hollower. He gave me money. I put it away . . what I did not give to someone whom I chanced to meet—I met so few—who seemed to want it. Than this, I thought no farther. . .

.

I was fifteen years old in the sun. It was June. June in its deep pathos in New York, where men and women are plants cut off from the wet earth and the limpid skies of June. The air is full of the longing of men and women for the air of June. The streets flower with the wills of men and women dreaming of June. I felt this. I worked at the bootblack stand on the street in these warm June days. I saw them pass me, trailing each a little verdant banner. I saw these banners catch upon each other, intertwine, draw close the face of a man and the face of a woman.

After work, I went upstairs to my mother. She sat beside the table, very dark in the twilight.

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Above her was the lurid red and gold of the picture of the Virgin.

"Mama, let's go for a walk."

She laid aside her darning, she put about her thick-maned head a shawl of black. It made her still shorter, still thicker. She stood up with her eyes glad in the shadow: and against her sombre form I saw the fading crimson of the Virgin.

We walked that time to the little Park by the River. Mother said no word; but as we crossed each avenue she took my hand—as if I was not big enough to cross alone!—and guiding me across she pressed my hand. That was her word, repeated till we sat together on a bench.

There was a dance in me. The waves tossed up short: the grass sang in the breeze: sparrows swarmed and circled in the trilling air. A warm thickness grew within the world, a sort of swelling everywhere. It brought each thing closer to each other: lives touched: a fertile languor slackened the dance of wave and bird and us all. We were fixed together.

"Paolo," said my mother in the hush of twilight, "neither your Papa nor I like for you to do what you do at the shop. We got plenty of money. Why don't you stop?"

"I'll stop, if you want me too."

"What will you do, Paolo? I so want to know, what will you do?"

She was full of question and of love . . . so full, that she was young beside me. I looked at my

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mother. —I have been in Thee! In Thy flesh my heart learnt to beat, in Thy flesh I became myself. I looked at this little woman bundled in a shawl for the air was fresh, and knew the dreadful separateness of us two beyond all others, because I had been in her flesh. I wanted to touch my mother. There beyond, on the brow of the mounting Park, was another woman: I touched her. —I cannot touch Thee?

Her eyes met mine: a blaze of terror beyond the sight of us both sent our eyes apart. Separatel It is written.

“Mother,” I whispered, “mother . . what do you know of me?”

“I know nothing of you, Paolo. I am a Christian woman. You are my son . . my blessing. What should I know of you?”

My voice was far, her body was far. But her voice was near!

“Soon I will stop from shining shoes,” I said. And it seemed to me that between my mother and me there were many people . . men and women: and all of us her children, and I the child of them all.

I was afraid: so far she was, and so dear. I wept. She saw me sitting there still, who wept. I saw her hands come to mend me, to comfort me. Hands clasped my face, hard stranger hands! It was monstrous! What were these hands to my mother, what to me?

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She felt a shrinking. She withdrew her hands. I got up. I accepted her apartness. . .

The next morning, I worked early at the stand, for it was Saturday. To each customer I said:

"This is the last time I shine your shoes."

I must have said it strangely. For some laughed: some did not hear. No one seemed to believe me.

In the late afternoon I went to my room and from a drawer I took a purse bulging with dollar bills. I placed it in my breast pocket. I moved downstairs through a calm emptiness from which each object . . chair and basket and rack . . thrust out with insolent longing. I walked away.

I walked.

In the Pawnbroker's Shop, there was no one. The man looked at me as I shut the door which rang during the pause of my entrance. He was bald and on his shiny skull was a small black cap. He had a face wide and white. He had bulging eyes, colorless like fire. He had thin lips, very pale.

"What do you want?" he said.

An elevated train crashed past. I was still.

"What can I do for you?" he said.

I took my purse from my breast pocket, laid it on the counter of glass above the gleam of watches and bracelets and trinkets.

"A pistol," I said.

He stood very straight and high behind the counter. There was stillness, swept upon us by the thrust of the past crashing train.

He got down on his knees. I saw across the counter his pale bald head and his skull cap bowed low. He was on his knees, and on his knees he was praying.

Then he got up. In his eyes, bulging less, more liquid, I saw an answer. I smiled. He left me: he brought me back a pistol.

I pointed to the purse. He shook his head.

"Take the money. It is mine," I said to him.

"It is not mine," he answered.

I put the purse back in my breast pocket. I put the pistol in the pocket of my trousers where it pressed hard and cool against my leg. Each step I felt it press against my leg. It was hard and sheer there. I walking through the turgid city saw the pistol cutting a path before me. Cool and sheer like a knife. . .

Central Park at evening dusk lay in a blue mist. All of the Park was a soft flowing together of leaves and branches into gentle night.

I found thick bushes and lay down in them. The grass and the earth smote harsh against my face. They accepted me. The leaves and the branches and the earth flowed more and more together: swam more thickly about me into Night. . .

Once more, very far away, I heard the men and

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women breaking upon each other. . . Stillness.
. . Breaking, breaking. . . Whiteness. . . I heard
no sound. Breaking no more. . . I heard the
Stillness only, as I died.

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